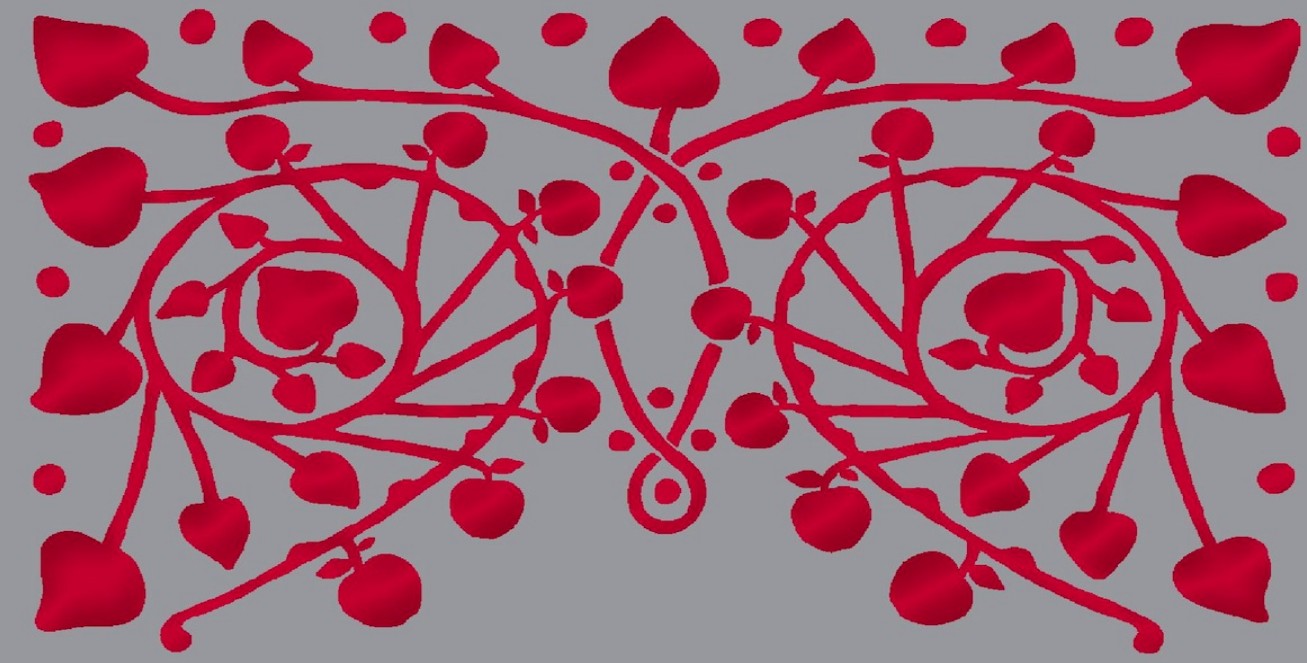

THE GIVER QUARTET

LOIS LOWRY

THE GIVER QUARTET

By LOIS LOWRY

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

Boston | New York

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The Giver Quartet

The Giver

Gathering Blue

Messenger

Son

THE GIVER

For all the children
To whom we entrust the future

One

IT WAS ALMOST December, and Jonas was beginning to be frightened. No. Wrong word, Jonas thought. Frightened meant that deep, sickening feeling of something terrible about to happen. Frightened was the way he had felt a year ago when an unidentified aircraft had overflown the community twice. He had seen it both times. Squinting toward the sky, he had seen the sleek jet, almost a blur at its high speed, go past, and a second later heard the blast of sound that followed. Then one more time, a moment later, from the opposite direction, the same plane.

At first, he had been only fascinated. He had never seen aircraft so close, for it was against the rules for Pilots to fly over the community. Occasionally, when supplies were delivered by cargo planes to the landing field across the river, the children rode their bicycles to the riverbank and watched, intrigued, the unloading and then the takeoff directed to the west, always away from the community.

But the aircraft a year ago had been different. It was not a squat, fat-bellied cargo plane but a needle-nosed single-pilot jet. Jonas, looking around anxiously, had seen others—adults as well as children—stop what they were doing and wait, confused, for an explanation of the frightening event.

Then all of the citizens had been ordered to go into the nearest building and stay there. IMMEDIATELY, the rasping voice through the speakers had said. LEAVE YOUR BICYCLES WHERE THEY ARE.

Instantly, obediently, Jonas had dropped his bike on its side on the path behind his family's dwelling. He had run indoors and stayed there, alone. His parents were both at work, and his little sister, Lily, was at the Childcare Center where she spent her after-school hours.

Looking through the front window, he had seen no people: none of the busy afternoon crew of Street Cleaners, Landscape Workers, and Food Delivery people who usually populated the community at that time of day. He saw only the abandoned bikes here and there on their sides; an upturned wheel on one was still revolving slowly.

He had been frightened then. The sense of his own community silent, waiting, had made his stomach churn. He had trembled.

But it had been nothing. Within minutes the speakers had crackled again, and the voice, reassuring now and less urgent, had explained that a Pilot-in-Training had misread his navigational instructions and made a wrong turn. Desperately the Pilot had been trying to make his way back before his error was noticed.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE WILL BE RELEASED, the voice had said, followed by silence. There was an ironic tone to that final message, as if the Speaker found it amusing; and Jonas had smiled a little, though he knew what a grim statement it had been. For a contributing citizen to be released from the community was a final decision, a terrible punishment, an overwhelming statement of failure.

Even the children were scolded if they used the term lightly at play, jeering at a teammate who missed a catch or stumbled in a race. Jonas had done it once, had shouted at his best friend, “That’s it, Asher! You’re released!” when Asher’s clumsy error had lost a match for his team. He had been taken aside for a brief and serious talk by the coach, had hung his head with guilt and embarrassment, and apologized to Asher after the game.

Now, thinking about the feeling of fear as he pedaled home along the river path, he remembered that moment of palpable, stomach-sinking terror when the aircraft had streaked above. It was not what he was feeling now with December approaching. He searched for the right word to describe his own feeling.

Jonas was careful about language. Not like his friend, Asher, who talked too fast and mixed things up, scrambling words and phrases until they were barely recognizable and often very funny.

Jonas grinned, remembering the morning that Asher had dashed into the classroom, late as usual, arriving breathlessly in the middle of the chanting of the morning anthem. When the class took their seats at the conclusion of the patriotic hymn, Asher remained standing to make his public apology as was required.

“I apologize for inconveniencing my learning community.” Asher ran through the standard apology phrase rapidly, still catching his breath. The Instructor and class waited patiently for his explanation. The students had all been grinning, because they had listened to Asher’s explanations so many times before.

“I left home at the correct time but when I was riding along near the hatchery, the crew was separating some salmon. I guess I just got distraught, watching them.

“I apologize to my classmates,” Asher concluded. He smoothed his rumpled tunic and sat down.

“We accept your apology, Asher.” The class recited the standard response in unison. Many of the students were biting their lips to keep from laughing.

“I accept your apology, Asher,” the Instructor said. He was smiling. “And I thank you, because once again you have provided an opportunity for a lesson in language. ‘Distraught’ is too strong an adjective to describe salmon-viewing.” He turned and wrote “distraught” on the instructional board. Beside it he wrote “distracted.”

Jonas, nearing his home now, smiled at the recollection. Thinking, still, as he wheeled his bike into its narrow port beside the door, he realized that frightened was the wrong word to describe his feelings, now that December was almost here. It was too strong an adjective.

He had waited a long time for this special December. Now that it was almost upon him, he wasn’t frightened, but he was . . . eager, he decided. He was eager for it to come. And he was excited, certainly. All of the Elevens were excited about the event that would be coming so soon.

But there was a little shudder of nervousness when he thought about it, about what might happen.

Apprehensive, Jonas decided. That’s what I am.

“Who wants to be the first tonight, for feelings?” Jonas’s father asked, at the conclusion of their evening meal.

It was one of the rituals, the evening telling of feelings. Sometimes Jonas and his sister, Lily, argued over turns, over who would get to go first. Their parents, of course, were part of the ritual; they, too, told their feelings each evening. But like all parents—all adults—they didn’t fight and wheedle for their turn.

Nor did Jonas, tonight. His feelings were too complicated this evening. He wanted to share them, but he wasn’t eager to begin the process of sifting through his own complicated emotions, even with the help that he knew his parents could give.

“You go, Lily,” he said, seeing his sister, who was much younger—only a Seven—wiggling with impatience in her chair.

“I felt very angry this afternoon,” Lily announced. “My Childcare group was at the play area, and we had a visiting group of Sevens, and they didn’t obey the rules at *all*. One of them—a male; I don’t know his name—kept going right to the front of the line for the slide, even though the rest of us were all waiting. I felt so angry at him. I made my hand into a fist, like this.” She held up a clenched fist and the rest of the family smiled at her small defiant gesture.

“Why do you think the visitors didn’t obey the rules?” Mother asked.

Lily considered, and shook her head. “I don’t know. They acted like . . . like . . .”

“Animals?” Jonas suggested. He laughed.

“That’s right,” Lily said, laughing too. “Like animals.” Neither child knew what the word meant, exactly, but it was often used to describe someone uneducated or clumsy, someone who didn’t fit in.

“Where were the visitors from?” Father asked.

Lily frowned, trying to remember. “Our leader told us, when he made the welcome speech, but I can’t remember. I guess I wasn’t paying attention. It was from another community. They had to leave very early, and they had their midday meal on the bus.”

Mother nodded. “Do you think it’s possible that their rules may be different? And so they simply didn’t know what your play area rules were?”

Lily shrugged, and nodded. “I suppose.”

“You’ve visited other communities, haven’t you?” Jonas asked. “My group has, often.”

Lily nodded again. “When we were Sixes, we went and shared a whole school day with a group of Sixes in their community.”

“How did you feel when you were there?”

Lily frowned. “I felt strange. Because their methods were different. They were learning usages that my group hadn’t learned yet, so we felt stupid.”

Father was listening with interest. “I’m thinking, Lily,” he said, “about the boy who didn’t obey the rules today. Do you think it’s possible that he felt strange and stupid, being in a new place with rules that he didn’t know about?”

Lily pondered that. “Yes,” she said, finally.

“I feel a little sorry for him,” Jonas said, “even though I don’t even know him. I feel sorry for anyone who is in a place where he feels strange and stupid.”

“How do you feel now, Lily?” Father asked. “Still angry?”

“I guess not,” Lily decided. “I guess I feel a little sorry for him. And sorry I made a fist.” She grinned.

Jonas smiled back at his sister. Lily’s feelings were always straightforward, fairly simple, usually easy to resolve. He guessed that his own had been, too, when he was a Seven.

He listened politely, though not very attentively, while his father took his turn, describing a feeling of worry that he’d had that day at work: a concern about one of the newchildren who wasn’t doing well. Jonas’s father’s title was Nurturer. He and the other Nurturers were responsible for all the physical and emotional needs of every newchild during its earliest life. It was a very important job, Jonas knew, but it wasn’t one that interested him much.

“What gender is it?” Lily asked.

“Male,” Father said. “He’s a sweet little male with a lovely disposition. But he isn’t growing as fast as he should, and he doesn’t sleep soundly. We have him in the extra care section for supplementary nurturing, but the committee’s beginning to talk about releasing him.”

“Oh, *no,*” Mother murmured sympathetically. “I know how sad that must make you feel.”

Jonas and Lily both nodded sympathetically as well. Release of newchildren was always sad, because they hadn’t had a chance to enjoy life within the community yet. And they hadn’t done anything wrong.

There were only two occasions of release which were not punishment. Release of the elderly, which was a time of celebration for a life well and fully lived; and release of a newchild, which always brought a sense of what-could-we-have-done. This was especially troubling for the Nurturers, like Father, who felt they had failed somehow. But it happened very rarely.

“Well,” Father said, “I’m going to keep trying. I may ask the committee for permission to bring him here at night, if you don’t mind. You know what the night-crew Nurturers are like. I think this little guy needs something extra.”

“Of course,” Mother said, and Jonas and Lily nodded. They had heard Father complain about the night crew before. It was a lesser job, night-crew nurturing, assigned to those who lacked the interest or skills or insight for the more vital jobs of the daytime hours. Most of the people on the night crew had not even been given spouses because they lacked, somehow, the essential capacity to connect to others, which was required for the creation of a family unit.

“Maybe we could even keep him,” Lily suggested sweetly, trying to look innocent. The look was fake, Jonas knew; they all knew.

“Lily,” Mother reminded her, smiling, “you know the rules.”

Two children—one male, one female—to each family unit. It was written very clearly in the rules.

Lily giggled. “Well,” she said, “I thought maybe just this once.”

Next, Mother, who held a prominent position at the Department of Justice, talked about her feelings. Today a repeat offender had been brought before her, someone who had broken the rules before. Someone who she hoped had been adequately and fairly punished, and who had been restored to his place: to his job, his home, his family unit. To see him brought before her a second time caused her overwhelming feelings of frustration and anger. And even guilt, that she hadn’t made a difference in his life.

“I feel frightened, too, for him,” she confessed. “You know that there’s no third chance. The rules say that if there’s a third transgression, he simply has to be released.” Jonas shivered. He knew it happened. There was even a boy in his group of Elevens whose father had been released years before. No one ever mentioned it; the disgrace was unspeakable. It was hard to imagine.

Lily stood up and went to her mother. She stroked her mother’s arm.

From his place at the table, Father reached over and took her hand. Jonas reached for the other.

One by one, they comforted her. Soon she smiled, thanked them, and murmured that she felt soothed.

The ritual continued. “Jonas?” Father asked. “You’re last, tonight.”

Jonas sighed. This evening he almost would have preferred to keep his feelings hidden. But it was, of course, against the rules.

“I’m feeling apprehensive,” he confessed, glad that the appropriate descriptive word had finally come to him.

“Why is that, son?” His father looked concerned.

“I know there’s really nothing to worry about,” Jonas explained, “and that every adult has been through it. I know you have, Father, and you too, Mother. But it’s the Ceremony that I’m apprehensive about. It’s almost December.”

Lily looked up, her eyes wide. “The Ceremony of Twelve,” she whispered in an awed voice. Even the smallest children—Lily’s age and younger—knew that it lay in the future for each of them.

“I’m glad you told us of your feelings,” Father said.

“Lily,” Mother said, beckoning to the little girl, “Go on now and get into your nightclothes. Father and I are going to stay here and talk to Jonas for a while.”

Lily sighed, but obediently she got down from her chair. “Privately?” she asked.

Mother nodded. “Yes,” she said, “this talk will be a private one with Jonas.”

Two

JONAS WATCHED AS his father poured a fresh cup of coffee. He waited.

"You know," his father finally said, "every December was exciting to me when I was young. And it has been for you and Lily, too, I'm sure. Each December brings such changes."

Jonas nodded. He could remember the Decembers back to when he had become, well, probably a Four. The earlier ones were lost to him. But he observed them each year, and he remembered Lily's earliest Decembers. He remembered when his family received Lily, the day she was named, the day that she had become a One.

The Ceremony for the Ones was always noisy and fun. Each December, all the newchildren born in the previous year turned One. One at a time—there were always fifty in each year's group, if none had been released—they had been brought to the stage by the Nurturers who had cared for them since birth. Some were already walking, wobbly on their unsteady legs; others were no more than a few days old, wrapped in blankets, held by their Nurturers.

"I enjoy the Naming," Jonas said.

His mother agreed, smiling. "The year we got Lily, we knew, of course, that we'd receive our female, because we'd made our application and been approved. But I'd been wondering and wondering what her name would be."

"I could have sneaked a look at the list prior to the ceremony," Father confided. "The committee always makes the list in advance, and it's right there in the office at the Nurturing Center.

"As a matter of fact," he went on, "I feel a little guilty about this. But I *did* go in this afternoon and looked to see if this year's Naming list had been made yet. It was right there in the office, and I looked up number Thirty-six—that's the little guy I've been concerned about—because it occurred to me that it might enhance his nurturing if I could call him by a name. Just privately, of course, when no one else is around."

"Did you find it?" Jonas asked. He was fascinated. It didn't seem a terribly important rule, but the fact that his father had broken a rule at all

awed him. He glanced at his mother, the one responsible for adherence to the rules, and was relieved that she was smiling.

His father nodded. “His name—if he makes it to the Naming without being released, of course—is to be Gabriel. So I whisper that to him when I feed him every four hours, and during exercise and playtime. If no one can hear me.

“I call him Gabe, actually,” he said, and grinned.

“Gabe.” Jonas tried it out. A good name, he decided.

Though Jonas had only become a Five the year that they acquired Lily and learned her name, he remembered the excitement, the conversations at home, wondering about her: how she would look, who she would be, how she would fit into their established family unit. He remembered climbing the steps to the stage with his parents, his father by his side that year instead of with the Nurturers, since it was the year that he would be given a newchild of his own.

He remembered his mother taking the newchild, his sister, into her arms, while the document was read to the assembled family units. “Newchild Twenty-three,” the Namer had read. “Lily.”

He remembered his father’s look of delight, and that his father had whispered, “She’s one of my favorites. I was hoping for her to be the one.” The crowd had clapped, and Jonas had grinned. He liked his sister’s name. Lily, barely awake, had waved her small fist. Then they had stepped down to make room for the next family unit.

“When I was an Eleven,” his father said now, “as you are, Jonas, I was very impatient, waiting for the Ceremony of Twelve. It’s a long two days. I remember that I enjoyed the Ones, as I always do, but that I didn’t pay much attention to the other ceremonies, except for my sister’s. She became a Nine that year, and got her bicycle. I’d been teaching her to ride mine, even though technically I wasn’t supposed to.”

Jonas laughed. It was one of the few rules that was not taken very seriously and was almost *always* broken. The children all received their bicycles at Nine; they were not allowed to ride bicycles before then. But almost always, the older brothers and sisters had secretly taught the younger ones. Jonas had been thinking already about teaching Lily.

There was talk about changing the rule and giving the bicycles at an earlier age. A committee was studying the idea. When something went to a committee for study, the people always joked about it. They said that the

committee members would become Elders by the time the rule change was made.

Rules were very hard to change. Sometimes, if it was a very important rule—unlike the one governing the age for bicycles—it would have to go, eventually, to The Receiver for a decision. The Receiver was the most important Elder. Jonas had never even seen him, that he knew of; someone in a position of such importance lived and worked alone. But the committee would never bother The Receiver with a question about bicycles; they would simply fret and argue about it themselves for years, until the citizens forgot that it had ever gone to them for study.

His father continued. “So I watched and cheered when my sister, Katya, became a Nine and removed her hair ribbons and got her bicycle,” Father went on. “Then I didn’t pay much attention to the Tens and Elevens. And *finally,* at the end of the second day, which seemed to go on forever, it was my turn. It was the Ceremony of Twelve.”

Jonas shivered. He pictured his father, who must have been a shy and quiet boy, for he was a shy and quiet man, seated with his group, waiting to be called to the stage. The Ceremony of Twelve was the last of the Ceremonies. The most important.

“I remember how proud my parents looked—and my sister, too; even though she wanted to be out riding the bicycle publicly, she stopped fidgeting and was very still and attentive when my turn came.

“But to be honest, Jonas,” his father said, “for me there was not the element of suspense that there is with your Ceremony. Because I was already fairly certain of what my Assignment was to be.”

Jonas was surprised. There was no way, really, to know in advance. It was a secret selection, made by the leaders of the community, the Committee of Elders, who took the responsibility so seriously that there were never even any jokes made about Assignments.

His mother seemed surprised, too. “How could you have known?” she asked.

His father smiled his gentle smile. “Well, it was clear to me—and my parents later confessed that it had been obvious to them, too—what my aptitude was. I had always loved the newchildren more than anything. When my friends in my age group were holding bicycle races, or building toy vehicles or bridges with their construction sets, or—”

“All the things I do with my friends,” Jonas pointed out, and his mother nodded in agreement.

“I always participated, of course, because as children we must experience all of those things. And I studied hard in school, as you do, Jonas. But again and again, during free time, I found myself drawn to the newchildren. I spent almost all of my volunteer hours helping in the Nurturing Center. Of course the Elders knew that, from their observation.”

Jonas nodded. During the past year he had been aware of the increasing level of observation. In school, at recreation time, and during volunteer hours, he had noticed the Elders watching him and the other Elevens. He had seen them taking notes. He knew, too, that the Elders were meeting for long hours with all of the instructors that he and the other Elevens had had during their years of school.

“So I expected it, and I was pleased, but not at all surprised, when my Assignment was announced as Nurturer,” Father explained.

“Did everyone applaud, even though they weren’t surprised?” Jonas asked.

“Oh, of course. They were happy for me, that my Assignment was what I wanted most. I felt very fortunate.” His father smiled.

“Were any of the Elevens disappointed, your year?” Jonas asked. Unlike his father, he had no idea what his Assignment would be. But he knew that some would disappoint him. Though he respected his father’s work, Nurturer would not be his wish. And he didn’t envy Laborers at all.

His father thought. “No, I don’t think so. Of course the Elders are so careful in their observations and selections.”

“I think it’s probably the most important job in our community,” his mother commented.

“My friend Yoshiko was surprised by her selection as Doctor,” Father said, “but she was thrilled. And let’s see, there was Andrei—I remember that when we were boys he never wanted to do physical things. He spent all the recreation time he could with his construction set, and his volunteer hours were always on building sites. The Elders knew that, of course. Andrei was given the Assignment of Engineer and he was delighted.”

“Andrei later designed the bridge that crosses the river to the west of town,” Jonas’s mother said. “It wasn’t there when we were children.”

“There are very rarely disappointments, Jonas. I don’t think you need to worry about that,” his father reassured him. “And if there are, you know

there's an appeal process." But they all laughed at that—an appeal went to a committee for study.

"I worry a little about Asher's Assignment," Jonas confessed. "Asher's such *fun*. But he doesn't really have any serious interests. He makes a game out of everything."

His father chuckled. "You know," he said, "I remember when Asher was a newchild at the Nurturing Center, before he was named. He never cried. He giggled and laughed at everything. All of us on the staff enjoyed nurturing Asher."

"The Elders know Asher," his mother said. "They'll find exactly the right Assignment for him. I don't think you need to worry about him. But, Jonas, let me warn you about something that may not have occurred to you. I know I didn't think about it until after my Ceremony of Twelve."

"What's that?"

"Well, it's the last of the Ceremonies, as you know. After Twelve, age isn't important. Most of us even lose track of how old we are as time passes, though the information is in the Hall of Open Records, and we could go and look it up if we wanted to. What's important is the preparation for adult life, and the training you'll receive in your Assignment."

"I know that," Jonas said. "Everyone knows that."

"But it means," his mother went on, "that you'll move into a new group. And each of your friends will. You'll no longer be spending your time with your group of Elevens. After the Ceremony of Twelve, you'll be with your Assignment group, with those in training. No more volunteer hours. No more recreation hours. So your friends will no longer be as close."

Jonas shook his head. "Asher and I will always be friends," he said firmly. "And there will still be school."

"That's true," his father agreed. "But what your mother said is true as well. There will be changes."

"*Good* changes, though," his mother pointed out. "After my Ceremony of Twelve, I missed my childhood recreation. But when I entered my training for Law and Justice, I found myself with people who shared my interests. I made friends on a new level, friends of all ages."

"Did you still play at all, after Twelve?" Jonas asked.

"Occasionally," his mother replied. "But it didn't seem as important to me."

“I did,” his father said, laughing. “I still do. Every day, at the Nurturing Center, I play bounce-on-the-knee, and peek-a-boo, and hug-the-teddy.” He reached over and stroked Jonas’s neatly trimmed hair. “Fun doesn’t end when you become Twelve.”

Lily appeared, wearing her nightclothes, in the doorway. She gave an impatient sigh. “This is certainly a very *long* private conversation,” she said. “And there are certain people waiting for their comfort object.”

“Lily,” her mother said fondly, “you’re very close to being an Eight, and when you’re an Eight, your comfort object will be taken away. It will be recycled to the younger children. You should be starting to go off to sleep without it.”

But her father had already gone to the shelf and taken down the stuffed elephant which was kept there. Many of the comfort objects, like Lily’s, were soft, stuffed, imaginary creatures. Jonas’s had been called a bear.

“Here you are, Lily-billy,” he said. “I’ll come help you remove your hair ribbons.”

Jonas and his mother rolled their eyes, yet they watched affectionately as Lily and her father headed to her sleeping room with the stuffed elephant that had been given to her as her comfort object when she was born. His mother moved to her big desk and opened her briefcase; her work never seemed to end, even when she was at home in the evening. Jonas went to his own desk and began to sort through his school papers for the evening’s assignment. But his mind was still on December and the coming Ceremony.

Though he had been reassured by the talk with his parents, he hadn’t the slightest idea what Assignment the Elders would be selecting for his future, or how he might feel about it when the day came.

Three

"OH, LOOK!" LILY squealed in delight. "Isn't he cute? Look how tiny he is! And he has funny eyes like yours, Jonas!" Jonas glared at her. He didn't like it that she had mentioned his eyes. He waited for his father to chastise Lily. But Father was busy unstrapping the carrying basket from the back of his bicycle. Jonas walked over to look.

It was the first thing Jonas noticed as he looked at the newchild peering up curiously from the basket. The pale eyes.

Almost every citizen in the community had dark eyes. His parents did, and Lily did, and so did all of his group members and friends. But there were a few exceptions: Jonas himself, and a female Five who he had noticed had the different, lighter eyes. No one mentioned such things; it was not a rule, but was considered rude to call attention to things that were unsettling or different about individuals. Lily, he decided, would have to learn that soon, or she would be called in for chastisement because of her insensitive chatter.

Father put his bike into its port. Then he picked up the basket and carried it into the house. Lily followed behind, but she glanced back over her shoulder at Jonas and teased, "Maybe he had the same Birthmother as you."

Jonas shrugged. He followed them inside. But he had been startled by the newchild's eyes. Mirrors were rare in the community; they weren't forbidden, but there was no real need of them, and Jonas had simply never bothered to look at himself very often even when he found himself in a location where a mirror existed. Now, seeing the newchild and its expression, he was reminded that the light eyes were not only a rarity but gave the one who had them a certain look—what was it? *Depth*, he decided; as if one were looking into the clear water of the river, down to the bottom, where things might lurk which hadn't been discovered yet. He felt self-conscious, realizing that he, too, had that look.

He went to his desk, pretending not to be interested in the newchild. On the other side of the room, Mother and Lily were bending over to watch as Father unwrapped its blanket.

“What’s his comfort object called?” Lily asked, picking up the stuffed creature which had been placed beside the newchild in his basket.

Father glanced at it. “Hippo,” he said.

Lily giggled at the strange word. “Hippo,” she repeated, and put the comfort object down again. She peered at the unwrapped newchild, who waved his arms.

“I think newchildren are so cute,” Lily sighed. “I hope I get assigned to be a Birthmother.”

“Lily!” Mother spoke very sharply. “Don’t say that. There’s very little honor in that Assignment.”

“But I was talking to Natasha. You know the Ten who lives around the corner? She does some of her volunteer hours at the Birthing Center. And she told me that the Birthmothers get wonderful food, and they have very gentle exercise periods, and most of the time they just play games and amuse themselves while they’re waiting. I think I’d like that,” Lily said petulantly.

“Three years,” Mother told her firmly. “Three births, and that’s all. After that they are Laborers for the rest of their adult lives, until the day that they enter the House of the Old. Is that what you want, Lily? Three lazy years, and then hard physical labor until you are old?”

“Well, no, I guess not,” Lily acknowledged reluctantly.

Father turned the newchild onto his tummy in the basket. He sat beside it and rubbed its small back with a rhythmic motion. “Anyway, Lily-billy,” he said affectionately, “the Birthmothers never even get to see newchildren. If you enjoy the little ones so much, you should hope for an Assignment as Nurturer.”

“When you’re an Eight and start your volunteer hours, you can try some at the Nurturing Center,” Mother suggested.

“Yes, I think I will,” Lily said. She knelt beside the basket. “What did you say his name is? Gabriel? Hello, Gabriel,” she said in a singsong voice. Then she giggled. “Oops,” she whispered. “I think he’s alseep. I guess I’d better be quiet.”

Jonas turned to the school assignments on his desk. Some chance of *that*, he thought. Lily was *never* quiet. Probably she should hope for an Assignment as Speaker, so that she could sit in the office with the microphone all day, making announcements. He laughed silently to himself, picturing his sister droning on in the self-important voice that all

the Speakers seemed to develop, saying things like, ATTENTION. THIS IS A REMINDER TO FEMALES UNDER NINE THAT HAIR RIBBONS ARE TO BE NEATLY TIED AT ALL TIMES.

He turned toward Lily and noticed to his satisfaction that her ribbons were, as usual, undone and dangling. There would be an announcement like that quite soon, he felt certain, and it would be directed mainly at Lily, though her name, of course, would not be mentioned. Everyone would know.

Everyone had known, he remembered with humiliation, that the announcement ATTENTION. THIS IS A REMINDER TO MALE ELEVENS THAT OBJECTS ARE NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM THE RECREATION AREA AND THAT SNACKS ARE TO BE EATEN, NOT HOARDED had been specifically directed at him, the day last month that he had taken an apple home. No one had mentioned it, not even his parents, because the public announcement had been sufficient to produce the appropriate remorse. He had, of course, disposed of the apple and made his apology to the Recreation Director the next morning, before school.

Jonas thought again about that incident. He was still bewildered by it. Not by the announcement or the necessary apology; those were standard procedures, and he had deserved them—but by the incident itself. He probably should have brought up his feeling of bewilderment that very evening when the family unit had shared their feelings of the day. But he had not been able to sort out and put words to the source of his confusion, so he had let it pass.

It had happened during the recreation period, when he had been playing with Asher. Jonas had casually picked up an apple from the basket where the snacks were kept, and had thrown it to his friend. Asher had thrown it back, and they had begun a simple game of catch.

There had been nothing special about it; it was an activity that he had performed countless times: throw, catch; throw, catch. It was effortless for Jonas, and even boring, though Asher enjoyed it, and playing catch was a required activity for Asher because it would improve his hand-eye coordination, which was not up to standards.

But suddenly Jonas had noticed, following the path of the apple through the air with his eyes, that the piece of fruit had—well, this was the part that he couldn’t adequately understand—the apple had *changed*. Just for an instant. It had changed in mid-air, he remembered. Then it was in his hand,

and he looked at it carefully, but it was the same apple. Unchanged. The same size and shape: a perfect sphere. The same nondescript shade, about the same shade as his own tunic.

There was absolutely nothing remarkable about that apple. He had tossed it back and forth between his hands a few times, then thrown it again to Asher. And again—in the air, for an instant only—it had changed.

It had happened four times. Jonas had blinked, looked around, and then tested his eyesight, squinting at the small print on the identification badge attached to his tunic. He read his name quite clearly. He could also clearly see Asher at the other end of the throwing area. And he had had no problem catching the apple.

Jonas had been completely mystified.

"Ash?" he had called. "Does anything seem strange to you? About the apple?"

"Yes," Asher called back, laughing. "It jumps out of my hand onto the ground!" Asher had just dropped it once again.

So Jonas laughed too, and with his laughter tried to ignore his uneasy conviction that *something* had happened. But he had taken the apple home, against the recreation area rules. That evening, before his parents and Lily arrived at the dwelling, he had held it in his hands and looked at it carefully. It was slightly bruised now, because Asher had dropped it several times. But there was nothing at all unusual about the apple.

He had held a magnifying glass to it. He had tossed it several times across the room, watching, and then rolled it around and around on his desktop, waiting for the thing to happen again.

But it hadn't. The only thing that happened was the announcement later that evening over the speaker, the announcement that had singled him out without using his name, that had caused both of his parents to glance meaningfully at his desk where the apple still lay.

Now, sitting at his desk, staring at his schoolwork as his family hovered over the newchild in its basket, he shook his head, trying to forget the odd incident. He forced himself to arrange his papers and try to study a little before the evening meal. The newchild, Gabriel, stirred and whimpered, and Father spoke softly to Lily, explaining the feeding procedure as he opened the container that held the formula and equipment.

The evening proceeded as all evenings did in the family unit, in the dwelling, in the community: quiet, reflective, a time for renewal and

preparation for the day to come. It was different only in the addition to it of the newchild with his pale, solemn, knowing eyes.

Four

JONAS RODE AT a leisurely pace, glancing at the bikeports beside the buildings to see if he could spot Asher's. He didn't often do his volunteer hours with his friend because Asher frequently fooled around and made serious work a little difficult. But now, with Twelve coming so soon and the volunteer hours ending, it didn't seem to matter.

The freedom to choose where to spend those hours had always seemed a wonderful luxury to Jonas; other hours of the day were so carefully regulated.

He remembered when he had become an Eight, as Lily would do shortly, and had been faced with that freedom of choice. The Eights always set out on their first volunteer hour a little nervously, giggling and staying in groups of friends. They almost invariably did their hours on Recreation Duty first, helping with the younger ones in a place where they still felt comfortable. But with guidance, as they developed self-confidence and maturity, they moved on to other jobs, gravitating toward those that would suit their own interests and skills.

A male Eleven named Benjamin had done his entire nearly-Four years in the Rehabilitation Center, working with citizens who had been injured. It was rumored that he was as skilled now as the Rehabilitation Directors themselves, and that he had even developed some machines and methods to hasten rehabilitation. There was no doubt that Benjamin would receive his Assignment to that field and would probably be permitted to bypass most of the training.

Jonas was impressed by the things Benjamin had achieved. He knew him, of course, since they had always been groupmates, but they had never talked about the boy's accomplishments because such a conversation would have been awkward for Benjamin. There was never any comfortable way to mention or discuss one's successes without breaking the rule against bragging, even if one didn't mean to. It was a minor rule, rather like rudeness, punishable only by gentle chastisement. But still. Better to steer clear of an occasion governed by a rule which would be so easy to break.

The area of dwellings behind him, Jonas rode past the community structures, hoping to spot Asher's bicycle parked beside one of the small factories or office buildings. He passed the Childcare Center where Lily stayed after school, and the play areas surrounding it. He rode through the Central Plaza and the large Auditorium where public meetings were held.

Jonas slowed and looked at the nametags on the bicycles lined up outside the Nurturing Center. Then he checked those outside Food Distribution; it was always fun to help with the deliveries, and he hoped he would find his friend there so that they could go together on the daily rounds, carrying the cartons of supplies into the dwellings of the community. But he finally found Asher's bicycle—leaning, as usual, instead of upright in its port, as it should have been—at the House of the Old.

There was only one other child's bicycle there, that of a female Eleven named Fiona. Jonas liked Fiona. She was a good student, quiet and polite, but she had a sense of fun as well, and it didn't surprise him that she was working with Asher today. He parked his bicycle neatly in the port beside theirs and entered the building.

"Hello, Jonas," the attendant at the front desk said. She handed him the sign-up sheet and stamped her own official seal beside his signature. All of his volunteer hours would be carefully tabulated at the Hall of Open Records. Once, long ago, it was whispered among the children, an Eleven had arrived at the Ceremony of Twelve only to hear a public announcement that he had not completed the required number of volunteer hours and would not, therefore, be given his Assignment. He had been permitted an additional month in which to complete the hours, and then given his Assignment privately, with no applause, no celebration: a disgrace that had clouded his entire future.

"It's good to have some volunteers here today," the attendant told him. "We celebrated a release this morning, and that always throws the schedule off a little, so things get backed up." She looked at a printed sheet. "Let's see. Asher and Fiona are helping in the bathing room. Why don't you join them there? You know where it is, don't you?"

Jonas nodded, thanked her, and walked down the long hallway. He glanced into the rooms on either side. The Old were sitting quietly, some visiting and talking with one another, others doing handwork and simple crafts. A few were asleep. Each room was comfortably furnished, the

floors covered with thick carpeting. It was a serene and slow-paced place, unlike the busy centers of manufacture and distribution where the daily work of the community occurred.

Jonas was glad that he had, over the years, chosen to do his hours in a variety of places so that he could experience the differences. He realized, though, that not focusing on one area meant he was left with not the slightest idea—not even a *guess*—of what his Assignment would be.

He laughed softly. Thinking about the Ceremony again, Jonas? he teased himself. But he suspected that with the date so near, probably all of his friends were, too.

He passed a Caretaker walking slowly with one of the Old in the hall. "Hello, Jonas," the young uniformed man said, smiling pleasantly. The woman beside him, whose arm he held, was hunched over as she shuffled along in her soft slippers. She looked toward Jonas and smiled, but her dark eyes were clouded and blank. He realized she was blind.

He entered the bathing room with its warm moist air and scent of cleansing lotions. He removed his tunic, hung it carefully on a wall hook, and put on the volunteer's smock that was folded on a shelf.

"Hi, Jonas!" Asher called from the corner where he was kneeling beside a tub. Jonas saw Fiona nearby, at a different tub. She looked up and smiled at him, but she was busy, gently washing a man who lay in the warm water.

Jonas greeted them and the caretaking attendants at work nearby. Then he went to the row of padded lounging chairs where others of the Old were waiting. He had worked here before; he knew what to do.

"Your turn, Larissa," he said, reading the nametag on the woman's robe. "I'll just start the water and then help you up." He pressed the button on a nearby empty tub and watched as the warm water flowed in through the many small openings on the sides. The tub would be filled in a minute and the water flow would stop automatically.

He helped the woman from the chair, led her to the tub, removed her robe, and steadied her with his hand on her arm as she stepped in and lowered herself. She leaned back and sighed with pleasure, her head on a soft cushioned headrest.

"Comfortable?" he asked, and she nodded, her eyes closed. Jonas squeezed cleansing lotion onto the clean sponge at the edge of the tub and began to wash her frail body.

Last night he had watched as his father bathed the newchild. This was much the same: the fragile skin, the soothing water, the gentle motion of his hand, slippery with soap. The relaxed, peaceful smile on the woman's face reminded him of Gabriel being bathed.

And the nakedness, too. It was against the rules for children or adults to look at another's nakedness; but the rule did not apply to newchildren or the Old. Jonas was glad. It was a nuisance to keep oneself covered while changing for games, and the required apology if one had by mistake glimpsed another's body was always awkward. He couldn't see why it was necessary. He liked the feeling of safety here in this warm and quiet room; he liked the expression of trust on the woman's face as she lay in the water unprotected, exposed, and free.

From the corner of his eye he could see his friend Fiona help the old man from the tub and tenderly pat his thin, naked body dry with an absorbant cloth. She helped him into his robe.

Jonas thought Larissa had drifted into sleep, as the Old often did, and he was careful to keep his motions steady and gentle so he wouldn't wake her. He was surprised when she spoke, her eyes still closed.

"This morning we celebrated the release of Roberto," she told him. "It was wonderful."

"I knew Roberto!" Jonas said. "I helped with his feeding the last time I was here, just a few weeks ago. He was a very interesting man."

Larissa opened her eyes happily. "They told his whole life before they released him," she said. "They always do. But to be honest," she whispered with a mischievous look, "some of the tellings are a little boring. I've even seen some of the Old fall asleep during tellings—when they released Edna recently. Did you know Edna?"

Jonas shook his head. He couldn't recall anyone named Edna.

"Well, they tried to make her life sound meaningful. And of course," she added primly, "all lives *are* meaningful, I don't mean that they aren't. But *Edna*. My goodness. She was a Birthmother, and then she worked in Food Production for years, until she came here. She never even had a family unit."

Larissa lifted her head and looked around to make sure no one else was listening. Then she confided, "I don't think Edna was very smart."

Jonas laughed. He rinsed her left arm, laid it back into the water, and began to wash her feet. She murmured with pleasure as he massaged her

feet with the sponge.

"But Roberto's life was wonderful," Larissa went on, after a moment. "He had been an Instructor of Elevens—you know how important that is—and he'd been on the Planning Committee. And—goodness, I don't know how he found the time—he also raised two very successful children, and he was *also* the one who did the landscaping design for the Central Plaza. He didn't do the actual labor, of course."

"Now your back. Lean forward and I'll help you sit up." Jonas put his arm around her and supported her as she sat. He squeezed the sponge against her back and began to rub her sharp-boned shoulders. "Tell me about the celebration."

"Well, there was the telling of his life. That is always first. Then the toast. We all raised our glasses and cheered. We chanted the anthem. He made a lovely good-bye speech. And several of us made little speeches wishing him well. I didn't, though. I've never been fond of public speaking.

"He was thrilled. You should have seen the look on his face when they let him go."

Jonas slowed the strokes of his hand on her back thoughtfully. "Larissa," he asked, "what happens when they make the actual release? Where exactly did Roberto go?"

She lifted her bare wet shoulders in a small shrug. "I don't know. I don't think anybody does, except the committee. He just bowed to all of us and then walked, like they all do, through the special door in the Releasing Room. But you should have seen his look. Pure happiness, I'd call it."

Jonas grinned. "I wish I'd been there to see it."

Larissa frowned. "I don't know why they don't let children come. Not enough room, I guess. They should enlarge the Releasing Room."

"We'll have to suggest that to the committee. Maybe they'd study it," Jonas said slyly, and Larissa chortled with laughter.

"*Right!*" she hooted, and Jonas helped her from the tub.

Five

USUALLY, AT THE morning ritual when the family members told their dreams, Jonas didn't contribute much. He rarely dreamed. Sometimes he awoke with a feeling of fragments afloat in his sleep, but he couldn't seem to grasp them and put them together into something worthy of telling at the ritual.

But this morning was different. He had dreamed very vividly the night before.

His mind wandered while Lily, as usual, recounted a lengthy dream, this one a frightening one in which she had, against the rules, been riding her mother's bicycle and been caught by the Security Guards.

They all listened carefully and discussed with Lily the warning that the dream had given.

"Thank you for your dream, Lily." Jonas said the standard phrase automatically, and tried to pay better attention while his mother told of a dream fragment, a disquieting scene where she had been chastised for a rule infraction she didn't understand. Together they agreed that it probably resulted from her feelings when she had reluctantly dealt punishment to the citizen who had broken the major rules a second time.

Father said that he had had no dreams.

"Gabe?" Father asked, looking down at the basket where the newchild lay gurgling after his feeding, ready to be taken back to the Nurturing Center for the day.

They all laughed. Dream-telling began with Threes. If newchildren dreamed, no one knew.

"Jonas?" Mother asked. They always asked, though they knew how rarely Jonas had a dream to tell.

"I *did* dream last night," Jonas told them. He shifted in his chair, frowning.

"Good," Father said. "Tell us."

"The details aren't clear, really," Jonas explained, trying to recreate the odd dream in his mind. "I think I was in the bathing room at the House of the Old."

"That's where you were yesterday," Father pointed out.

Jonas nodded. “But it wasn’t really the same. There was a tub, in the dream. But only one. And the real bathing room has rows and rows of them. But the room in the dream was warm and damp. And I had taken off my tunic, but hadn’t put on the smock, so my chest was bare. I was perspiring, because it was so warm. And Fiona was there, the way she was yesterday.”

“Asher, too?” Mother asked.

Jonas shook his head. “No. It was only me and Fiona, alone in the room, standing beside the tub. She was laughing. But I wasn’t. I was almost a little angry at her, in the dream, because she wasn’t taking me seriously.”

“Seriously about what?” Lily asked.

Jonas looked at his plate. For some reason that he didn’t understand, he felt slightly embarrassed. “I think I was trying to convince her that she should get into the tub of water.”

He paused. He knew he had to tell it all, that it was not only all right but necessary to tell *all* of a dream. So he forced himself to relate the part that made him uneasy.

“I wanted her to take off her clothes and get into the tub,” he explained quickly. “I wanted to bathe her. I had the sponge in my hand. But she wouldn’t. She kept laughing and saying no.”

He looked up at his parents. “That’s all,” he said.

“Can you describe the strongest feeling in your dream, son?” Father asked.

Jonas thought about it. The details were murky and vague. But the feelings were clear, and flooded him again now as he thought. “The *wanting*,” he said. “I knew that she wouldn’t. And I think I knew that she *shouldn’t*. But I wanted it so terribly. I could feel the wanting all through me.”

“Thank you for your dream, Jonas,” Mother said after a moment. She glanced at Father.

“Lily,” Father said, “it’s time to leave for school. Would you walk beside me this morning and keep an eye on the newchild’s basket? We want to be certain he doesn’t wiggle himself loose.”

Jonas began to rise to collect his schoolbooks. He thought it surprising that they hadn’t talked about his dream at length before the thank you. Perhaps they found it as confusing as he had.

“Wait, Jonas,” Mother said gently. “I’ll write an apology to your instructor so that you won’t have to speak one for being late.”

He sank back down into his chair, puzzled. He waved to Father and Lily as they left the dwelling, carrying Gabe in his basket. He watched while Mother tidied the remains of the morning meal and placed the tray by the front door for the Collection Crew.

Finally she sat down beside him at the table. “Jonas,” she said with a smile, “the feeling you described as the wanting? It was your first Stirrings. Father and I have been expecting it to happen to you. It happens to everyone. It happened to Father when he was your age. And it happened to me. It will happen someday to Lily.

“And very often,” Mother added, “it begins with a dream.”

Stirrings. He had heard the word before. He remembered that there was a reference to the Stirrings in the Book of Rules, though he didn’t remember what it said. And now and then the Speaker mentioned it.

ATTENTION. A REMINDER THAT STIRRINGS MUST BE REPORTED IN ORDER FOR TREATMENT TO TAKE PLACE.

He had always ignored that announcement because he didn’t understand it and it had never seemed to apply to him in any way. He ignored, as most citizens did, many of the commands and reminders read by the Speaker.

“Do I have to report it?” he asked his mother.

She laughed. “You did, in the dream-telling. That’s enough.”

“But what about the treatment? The Speaker says that treatment must take place.” Jonas felt miserable. Just when the Ceremony was about to happen, his Ceremony of Twelve, would he have to go away someplace for treatment? Just because of a stupid dream?

But his mother laughed again in a reassuring, affectionate way. “No, no,” she said. “It’s just the pills. You’re ready for the pills, that’s all. That’s the treatment for Stirrings.”

Jonas brightened. He knew about the pills. His parents both took them each morning. And some of his friends did, he knew. Once he had been heading off to school with Asher, both of them on their bikes, when Asher’s father had called from their dwelling doorway, “You forgot your pill, Asher!” Asher had groaned good-naturedly, turned his bike, and ridden back while Jonas waited.

It was the sort of thing one didn’t ask a friend about because it might have fallen into that uncomfortable category of “being different.” Asher

took a pill each morning; Jonas did not. Always better, less rude, to talk about things that were the same.

Now he swallowed the small pill that his mother handed him.

"That's all?" he asked.

"That's all," she replied, returning the bottle to the cupboard. "But you mustn't forget. I'll remind you for the first weeks, but then you must do it on your own. If you forget, the Stirrings will come back. The dreams of Stirrings will come back. Sometimes the dosage must be adjusted."

"Asher takes them," Jonas confided.

His mother nodded, unsurprised. "Many of your groupmates probably do. The males, at least. And they all will, soon. Females too."

"How long will I have to take them?"

"Until you enter the House of the Old," she explained. "All of your adult life. But it becomes routine; after a while you won't even pay much attention to it."

She looked at her watch. "If you leave right now, you won't even be late for school. Hurry along.

"And thank you again, Jonas," she added, as he went to the door, "for your dream."

Pedaling rapidly down the path, Jonas felt oddly proud to have joined those who took the pills. For a moment, though, he remembered the dream again. The dream had felt pleasurable. Though the feelings were confused, he thought that he had liked the feelings that his mother had called Stirrings. He remembered that upon waking, he had wanted to feel the Stirrings again.

Then, in the same way that his own dwelling slipped away behind him as he rounded a corner on his bicycle, the dream slipped away from his thoughts. Very briefly, a little guiltily, he tried to grasp it back. But the feelings had disappeared. The Stirrings were gone.

Six

"LILY, *PLEASE* HOLD still," Mother said again.

Lily, standing in front of her, fidgeted impatiently. "I can tie them myself," she complained. "I always have."

"I know that," Mother replied, straightening the hair ribbons on the little girl's braids. "But I also know that they constantly come loose and more often than not, they're dangling down your back by afternoon. Today, at least, we want them to be neatly tied and to *stay* neatly tied."

"I don't like hair ribbons. I'm glad I only have to wear them one more year," Lily said irritably. "Next year I get my bicycle, too," she added more cheerfully.

"There are good things each year," Jonas reminded her. "This year you get to start your volunteer hours. And remember last year, when you became a Seven, you were so happy to get your front-buttoned jacket?"

The little girl nodded and looked down at herself, at the jacket with its row of large buttons that designated her as a Seven. Fours, Fives, and Sixes all wore jackets that fastened down the back so that they would have to help each other dress and would learn interdependence.

The front-buttoned jacket was the first sign of independence, the first very visible symbol of growing up. The bicycle, at Nine, would be the powerful emblem of moving gradually out into the community, away from the protective family unit.

Lily grinned and wriggled away from her mother. "And this year you get your Assignment," she said to Jonas in an excited voice. "I hope you get Pilot. And that you take me flying!"

"Sure I will," said Jonas. "And I'll get a special little parachute that just fits you, and I'll take you up to, oh, maybe twenty thousand feet, and open the door, and—"

"*Jonas,*" Mother warned.

"I was only joking," Jonas groaned. "I don't want Pilot, anyway. If I get Pilot I'll put in an appeal."

"Come on," Mother said. She gave Lily's ribbons a final tug. "Jonas? Are you ready? Did you take your pill? I want to get a good seat in the Auditorium." She prodded Lily to the front door and Jonas followed.

It was a short ride to the Auditorium, Lily waving to her friends from her seat on the back of Mother's bicycle. Jonas stowed his bicycle beside Mother's and made his way through the throng to find his group.

The entire community attended the Ceremony each year. For the parents, it meant two days holiday from work; they sat together in the huge hall. Children sat with their groups until they went, one by one, to the stage.

Father, though, would not join Mother in the audience right away. For the earliest ceremony, the Naming, the Nurturers brought the newchildren to the stage. Jonas, from his place in the balcony with the Elevens, searched the Auditorium for a glimpse of Father. It wasn't at all hard to spot the Nurturers' section at the front; coming from it were the wails and howls of the newchildren who sat squirming on the Nurturers' laps. At every other public ceremony, the audience was silent and attentive. But once a year, they all smiled indulgently at the commotion from the little ones waiting to receive their names and families.

Jonas finally caught his father's eye and waved. Father grinned and waved back, then held up the hand of the newchild on his lap, making it wave, too.

It wasn't Gabriel. Gabe was back at the Nurturing Center today, being cared for by the night crew. He had been given an unusual and special reprieve from the committee, and granted an additional year of nurturing before his Naming and Placement. Father had gone before the committee with a plea on behalf of Gabriel, who had not yet gained the weight appropriate to his days of life nor begun to sleep soundly enough at night to be placed with his family unit. Normally such a newchild would be labeled Inadequate and released from the community.

Instead, as a result of Father's plea, Gabriel had been labeled Uncertain and given the additional year. He would continue to be nurtured at the Center and would spend his nights with Jonas's family unit. Each family member, including Lily, had been required to sign a pledge that they would not become attached to this little temporary guest, and that they would relinquish him without protest or appeal when he was assigned to his own family unit at next year's Ceremony.

At least, Jonas thought, after Gabriel was placed next year, they would still see him often because he would be part of the community. If he were released, they would not see him again. Ever. Those who were released—

even as newchildren—were sent Elsewhere and never returned to the community.

Father had not had to release a single newchild this year, so Gabriel would have represented a real failure and sadness. Even Jonas, though he didn't hover over the little one the way Lily and his father did, was glad that Gabe had not been released.

The first Ceremony began right on time, and Jonas watched as one after another each newchild was given a name and handed by the Nurturers to its new family unit. For some, it was a first child. But many came to the stage accompanied by another child beaming with pride to receive a little brother or sister, the way Jonas had when he was about to be a Five.

Asher poked Jonas's arm. "Remember when we got Phillipa?" he asked in a loud whisper. Jonas nodded. It had only been last year. Asher's parents had waited quite a long time before applying for a second child. Maybe, Jonas suspected, they had been so exhausted by Asher's lively foolishness that they had needed a little time.

Two of their group, Fiona and another female named Thea, were missing temporarily, waiting with their parents to receive newchildren. But it was rare that there was such an age gap between children in a family unit.

When her family's ceremony was completed, Fiona took the seat that had been saved for her in the row ahead of Asher and Jonas. She turned and whispered to them, "He's cute. But I don't like his name very much." She made a face and giggled. Fiona's new brother had been named Bruno. It wasn't a *great* name, Jonas thought, like—well, like Gabriel, for example. But it was okay.

The audience applause, which was enthusiastic at each Naming, rose in an exuberant swell when one parental pair, glowing with pride, took a male newchild and heard him named Caleb.

This new Caleb was a replacement child. The couple had lost their first Caleb, a cheerful little Four. Loss of a child was very, very rare. The community was extraordinarily safe, each citizen watchful and protective of all children. But somehow the first little Caleb had wandered away unnoticed, and had fallen into the river. The entire community had performed the Ceremony of Loss together, murmuring the name Caleb throughout an entire day, less and less frequently, softer in volume, as the long and somber day went on, so that the little Four seemed to fade away gradually from everyone's consciousness.

Now, at this special Naming, the community performed the brief Murmur-of-Replacement Ceremony, repeating the name for the first time since the loss: softly and slowly at first, then faster and with greater volume, as the couple stood on the stage with the newchild sleeping in the mother's arms. It was as if the first Caleb were returning.

Another newchild was given the name Roberto, and Jonas remembered that Roberto the Old had been released only last week. But there was no Murmur-of-Replacement Ceremony for the new little Roberto. Release was not the same as Loss.

He sat politely through the ceremonies of Two and Three and Four, increasingly bored as he was each year. Then a break for midday meal—served outdoors—and back again to the seats, for the Fives, Sixes, Sevens, and finally, last of the first day's ceremonies, the Eights.

Jonas watched and cheered as Lily marched proudly to the stage, became an Eight and received the identifying jacket that she would wear this year, this one with smaller buttons and, for the first time, pockets, indicating that she was mature enough now to keep track of her own small belongings. She stood solemnly listening to the speech of firm instructions on the responsibilities of Eight and doing volunteer hours for the first time. But Jonas could see that Lily, though she seemed attentive, was looking longingly at the row of gleaming bicycles, which would be presented tomorrow morning to the Nines.

Next year, Lily-billy, Jonas thought.

It was an exhausting day, and even Gabriel, retrieved in his basket from the Nurturing Center, slept soundly that night.

Finally it was the morning of the Ceremony of Twelve.

Now Father sat beside Mother in the audience. Jonas could see them applauding dutifully as the Nines, one by one, wheeled their new bicycles, each with its gleaming nametag attached to the back, from the stage. He knew that his parents cringed a little, as he did, when Fritz, who lived in the dwelling next door to theirs, received his bike and almost immediately bumped into the podium with it. Fritz was a very awkward child who had been summoned for chastisement again and again. His transgressions were small ones, always: shoes on the wrong feet, schoolwork misplaced, failure to study adequately for a quiz. But each such error reflected negatively on his parents' guidance and infringed on the community's

sense of order and success. Jonas and his family had not been looking forward to Fritz's bicycle, which they realized would probably too often be dropped on the front walk instead of wheeled neatly into its port.

Finally the Nines were all resettled in their seats, each having wheeled a bicycle outside where it would be waiting for its owner at the end of the day. Everyone always chuckled and made small jokes when the Nines rode home for the first time. "Want me to show you how to ride?" older friends would call. "I know you've never been on a bike before!" But invariably the grinning Nines, who in technical violation of the rule had been practicing secretly for weeks, would mount and ride off in perfect balance, training wheels never touching the ground.

Then the Tens. Jonas never found the Ceremony of Ten particularly interesting—only time-consuming, as each child's hair was snipped neatly into its distinguishing cut: females lost their braids at Ten, and males, too, relinquished their long childish hair and took on the more manly short style which exposed their ears.

Laborers moved quickly to the stage with brooms and swept away the mounds of discarded hair. Jonas could see the parents of the new Tens stir and murmur, and he knew that this evening, in many dwellings, they would be snipping and straightening the hastily done haircuts, trimming them into a neater line.

Elevens. It seemed a short time ago that Jonas had undergone the Ceremony of Eleven, but he remembered that it was not one of the more interesting ones. By Eleven, one was only waiting to be Twelve. It was simply a marking of time with no meaningful changes. There was new clothing: different undergarments for the females, whose bodies were beginning to change; and longer trousers for the males, with a specially shaped pocket for the small calculator that they would use this year in school; but those were simply presented in wrapped packages without an accompanying speech.

Break for midday meal. Jonas realized he was hungry. He and his groupmates congregated by the tables in front of the Auditorium and took their packaged food. Yesterday there had been merriment at lunch, a lot of teasing and energy. But today the group stood anxiously, separate from the other children. Jonas watched the new Nines gravitate toward their waiting bicycles, each one admiring his or her nametag. He saw the Tens stroking

their new shortened hair, the females shaking their heads to feel the unaccustomed lightness without the heavy braids they had worn so long.

"I heard about a guy who was absolutely certain he was going to be assigned Engineer," Asher muttered as they ate, "and instead they gave him Sanitation Laborer. He went out the next day, jumped into the river, swam across, and joined the next community he came to. Nobody ever saw him again."

Jonas laughed. "Somebody made that story up, Ash," he said. "My father said he heard that story when *he* was a Twelve."

But Asher wasn't reassured. He was eyeing the river where it was visible behind the Auditorium. "I can't even swim very well," he said. "My swimming instructor said that I don't have the right boyishness or something."

"Buoyancy," Jonas corrected him.

"Whatever. I don't have it. I sink."

"Anyway," Jonas pointed out, "have you ever once known of anyone—I mean really known for sure, Asher, not just heard a story about it—who joined another community?"

"No," Asher admitted reluctantly. "But you can. It says so in the rules. If you don't fit in, you can apply for Elsewhere and be released. My mother says that once, about ten years ago, someone applied and was gone the next day." Then he chuckled. "She told me that because I was driving her crazy. She threatened to apply for Elsewhere."

"She was joking."

"I know. But it was true, what she said, that someone did that once. She said that it was really true. Here today and gone tomorrow. Never seen again. Not even a Ceremony of Release."

Jonas shrugged. It didn't worry him. How could someone not fit in? The community was so meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made.

Even the Matching of Spouses was given such weighty consideration that sometimes an adult who applied to receive a spouse waited months or even *years* before a Match was approved and announced. All of the factors—disposition, energy level, intelligence, and interests—had to correspond and to interact perfectly. Jonas's mother, for example, had higher intelligence than his father; but his father had a calmer disposition. They balanced each other. Their Match, which like all Matches had been

monitored by the Committee of Elders for three years before they could apply for children, had always been a successful one.

Like the Matching of Spouses and the Naming and Placement of newchildren, the Assignments were scrupulously thought through by the Committee of Elders.

He was certain that his Assignment, whatever it was to be, and Asher's too, would be the right one for them. He only wished that the midday break would conclude, that the audience would reenter the Auditorium, and the suspense would end.

As if in answer to his unspoken wish, the signal came and the crowd began to move toward the doors.

Seven

NOW JONAS'S GROUP had taken a new place in the Auditorium, trading with the new Elevens, so that they sat in the very front, immediately before the stage.

They were arranged by their original numbers, the numbers they had been given at birth. The numbers were rarely used after the Naming. But each child knew his number, of course. Sometimes parents used them in irritation at a child's misbehavior, indicating that mischief made one unworthy of a name. Jonas always chuckled when he heard a parent, exasperated, call sharply to a whining toddler, "That's *enough,* Twenty-three!"

Jonas was Nineteen. He had been the nineteenth newchild born his year. It had meant that at his Naming, he had been already standing and bright-eyed, soon to walk and talk. It had given him a slight advantage the first year or two, a little more maturity than many of his groupmates who had been born in the later months of that year. But it evened out, as it always did, by Three.

After Three, the children progressed at much the same level, though by their first number one could always tell who was a few months older than others in his group. Technically, Jonas's full number was Eleven-nineteen, since there were other Nineteens, of course, in each age group. And today, now that the new Elevens had been advanced this morning, there were *two* Eleven-nineteens. At the midday break he had exchanged smiles with the new one, a shy female named Harriet.

But the duplication was only for these few hours. Very soon he would not be an Eleven but a Twelve, and age would no longer matter. He would be an adult, like his parents, though a new one and untrained still.

Asher was Four, and sat now in the row ahead of Jonas. He would receive his Assignment fourth.

Fiona, Eighteen, was on his left; on his other side sat Twenty, a male named Pierre whom Jonas didn't like much. Pierre was very serious, not much fun, and a worrier and tattletale, too. "Have you checked the rules, Jonas?" Pierre was always whispering solemnly. "I'm not sure that's within the rules." Usually it was some foolish thing that no one cared

about—opening his tunic if it was a day with a breeze; taking a brief try on a friend's bicycle, just to experience the different feel of it.

The initial speech at the Ceremony of Twelve was made by the Chief Elder, the leader of the community who was elected every ten years. The speech was much the same each year: recollection of the time of childhood and the period of preparation, the coming responsibilities of adult life, the profound importance of Assignment, the seriousness of training to come.

Then the Chief Elder moved ahead in her speech.

"This is the time," she began, looking directly at them, "when we acknowledge differences. You Elevens have spent all your years till now learning to fit in, to standardize your behavior, to curb any impulse that might set you apart from the group.

"But today we honor your differences. They have determined your futures."

She began to describe this year's group and its variety of personalities, though she singled no one out by name. She mentioned that there was one who had singular skills at caretaking, another who loved newchildren, one with unusual scientific aptitude, and a fourth for whom physical labor was an obvious pleasure. Jonas shifted in his seat, trying to recognize each reference as one of his groupmates. The caretaking skills were no doubt those of Fiona, on his left; he remembered noticing the tenderness with which she had bathed the Old. Probably the one with scientific aptitude was Benjamin, the male who had devised new, important equipment for the Rehabilitation Center.

He heard nothing that he recognized as himself, Jonas.

Finally the Chief Elder paid tribute to the hard work of her committee, which had performed the observations so meticulously all year. The Committee of Elders stood and was acknowledged by applause. Jonas noticed Asher yawn slightly, covering his mouth politely with his hand.

Then, at last, the Chief Elder called number One to the stage, and the Assignments began.

Each announcement was lengthy, accompanied by a speech directed at the new Twelve. Jonas tried to pay attention as One, smiling happily, received her Assignment as Fish Hatchery Attendant along with words of praise for her childhood spent doing many volunteer hours there, and her obvious interest in the important process of providing nourishment for the community.

Number One—her name was Madeline—returned, finally, amidst applause, to her seat, wearing the new badge that designated her Fish Hatchery Attendant. Jonas was certainly glad that *that* Assignment was taken; he wouldn't have wanted it. But he gave Madeline a smile of congratulation.

When Two, a female named Inger, received her Assignment as Birthmother, Jonas remembered that his mother had called it a job without honor. But he thought that the Committee had chosen well. Inger was a nice girl though somewhat lazy, and her body was strong. She would enjoy the three years of being pampered that would follow her brief training; she would give birth easily and well; and the task of Laborer that would follow would use her strength, keep her healthy, and impose self-discipline. Inger was smiling when she resumed her seat. Birthmother was an important job, if lacking in prestige.

Jonas noticed that Asher looked nervous. He kept turning his head and glancing back at Jonas until the group leader had to give him a silent chastisement, a motion to sit still and face forward.

Three, Isaac, was given an Assignment as Instructor of Sixes, which obviously pleased him and was well deserved. Now there were three Assignments gone, none of them ones that Jonas would have liked—not that he could have been a Birthmother, anyway, he realized with amusement. He tried to sort through the list in his mind, the possible Assignments that remained. But there were so many he gave it up; and anyway, now it was Asher's turn. He paid strict attention as his friend went to the stage and stood self-consciously beside the Chief Elder.

"All of us in the community know and enjoy Asher," the Chief Elder began. Asher grinned and scratched one leg with the other foot. The audience chuckled softly.

"When the committee began to consider Asher's Assignment," she went on, "there were some possibilities that were immediately discarded. Some that would clearly not have been right for Asher.

"For example," she said, smiling, "we did not consider for an instant designating Asher an Instructor of Threes."

The audience howled with laughter. Asher laughed, too, looking sheepish but pleased at the special attention. The Instructors of Threes were in charge of the acquisition of correct language.

“In fact,” the Chief Elder continued, chuckling a little herself, “we even gave a little thought to some retroactive chastisement for the one who had been *Asher’s* Instructor of Threes so long ago. At the meeting where Asher was discussed, we retold many of the stories that we all remembered from his days of language acquisition.

“Especially,” she said, chuckling, “the difference between snack and smack. Remember, Asher?”

Asher nodded ruefully, and the audience laughed aloud. Jonas did, too. He remembered, though he had been only a Three at the time himself.

The punishment used for small children was a regulated system of smacks with the discipline wand: a thin, flexible weapon that stung painfully when it was wielded. The Childcare specialists were trained very carefully in the discipline methods: a quick smack across the hands for a bit of minor misbehavior; three sharper smacks on the bare legs for a second offense.

Poor Asher, who always talked too fast and mixed up words, even as a toddler. As a Three, eager for his juice and crackers at snacktime, he one day said “smack” instead of “snack” as he stood waiting in line for the morning treat.

Jonas remembered it clearly. He could still see little Asher, wiggling with impatience in the line. He remembered the cheerful voice call out, “I want my smack!”

The other Threes, including Jonas, had laughed nervously. “Snack!” they corrected. “You meant snack, Asher!” But the mistake had been made. And precision of language was one of the most important tasks of small children. Asher had asked for a smack.

The discipline wand, in the hand of the Childcare worker, whistled as it came down across Asher’s hands. Asher whimpered, cringed, and corrected himself instantly. “Snack,” he whispered.

But the next morning he had done it again. And again the following week. He couldn’t seem to stop, though for each lapse the discipline wand came again, escalating to a series of painful lashes that left marks on Asher’s legs. Eventually, for a period of time, Asher stopped talking altogether, when he was a Three.

“For a while,” the Chief Elder said, relating the story, “we had a silent Asher! But he learned.”

She turned to him with a smile. “When he began to talk again, it was with greater precision. And now his lapses are very few. His corrections and apologies are very prompt. And his good humor is unfailing.” The audience murmured in agreement. Asher’s cheerful disposition was well-known throughout the community.

“Asher.” She lifted her voice to make the official announcement. “We have given you the Assignment of Assistant Director of Recreation.”

She clipped on his new badge as he stood beside her, beaming. Then he turned and left the stage as the audience cheered. When he had taken his seat again, the Chief Elder looked down at him and said the words that she had said now four times, and would say to each new Twelve. Somehow she gave it special meaning for each of them.

“Asher,” she said, “thank you for your childhood.”

The Assignments continued, and Jonas watched and listened, relieved now by the wonderful Assignment his best friend had been given. But he was more and more apprehensive as his own approached. Now the new Twelves in the row ahead had all received their badges. They were fingering them as they sat, and Jonas knew that each one was thinking about the training that lay ahead. For some—one studious male had been selected as Doctor, a female as Engineer, and another for Law and Justice—it would be years of hard work and study. Others, like Laborers and Birthmothers, would have a much shorter training period.

Eighteen, Fiona, on his left, was called. Jonas knew she must be nervous, but Fiona was a calm female. She had been sitting quietly, serenely, throughout the Ceremony.

Even the applause, though enthusiastic, seemed serene when Fiona was given the important Assignment of Caretaker of the Old. It was perfect for such a sensitive, gentle girl, and her smile was satisfied and pleased when she took her seat beside him again.

Jonas prepared himself to walk to the stage when the applause ended and the Chief Elder picked up the next folder and looked down to the group to call forward the next new Twelve. He was calm now that his turn had come. He took a deep breath and smoothed his hair with his hand.

“Twenty,” he heard her voice say clearly. “Pierre.”

She skipped me, Jonas thought, stunned. Had he heard wrong? No. There was a sudden hush in the crowd, and he knew that the entire community

realized that the Chief Elder had moved from Eighteen to Twenty, leaving a gap. On his right, Pierre, with a startled look, rose from his seat and moved to the stage.

A mistake. She made a mistake. But Jonas knew, even as he had the thought, that she hadn't. The Chief Elder made no mistakes. Not at the Ceremony of Twelve.

He felt dizzy, and couldn't focus his attention. He didn't hear what Assignment Pierre received, and was only dimly aware of the applause as the boy returned, wearing his new badge. Then: Twenty-one. Twenty-two.

The numbers continued in order. Jonas sat, dazed, as they moved into the Thirties and then the Forties, nearing the end. Each time, at each announcement, his heart jumped for a moment, and he thought wild thoughts. Perhaps now she would call his name. Could he have forgotten his own number? No. He had always been Nineteen. He was sitting in the seat marked Nineteen.

But she had *skipped* him. He saw the others in his group glance at him, embarrassed, and then avert their eyes quickly. He saw a worried look on the face of his group leader.

He hunched his shoulders and tried to make himself smaller in the seat. He wanted to disappear, to fade away, not to exist. He didn't dare to turn and find his parents in the crowd. He couldn't bear to see their faces darkened with shame.

Jonas bowed his head and searched through his mind. *What had he done wrong?*

Eight

THE AUDIENCE WAS clearly ill at ease. They applauded at the final Assignment; but the applause was piecemeal, no longer a crescendo of united enthusiasm. There were murmurs of confusion.

Jonas moved his hands together, clapping, but it was an automatic, meaningless gesture that he wasn't even aware of. His mind had shut out all of the earlier emotions: the anticipation, excitement, pride, and even the happy kinship with his friends. Now he felt only humiliation and terror.

The Chief Elder waited until the uneasy applause subsided. Then she spoke again.

"I know," she said in her vibrant, gracious voice, "that you are all concerned. That you feel I have made a mistake."

She smiled. The community, relieved from its discomfort very slightly by her benign statement, seemed to breathe more easily. It was very silent. Jonas looked up.

"I have caused you anxiety," she said. "I apologize to my community." Her voice flowed over the assembled crowd.

"We accept your apology," they all uttered together.

"Jonas," she said, looking down at him, "I apologize to you in particular. I caused you anguish."

"I accept your apology," Jonas replied shakily.

"Please come to the stage now."

Earlier that day, dressing in his own dwelling, he had practiced the kind of jaunty, self-assured walk that he hoped he could make to the stage when his turn came. All of that was forgotten now. He simply willed himself to stand, to move his feet that felt weighted and clumsy, to go forward, up the steps and across the platform until he stood at her side.

Reassuringly she placed her arm across his tense shoulders.

"Jonas has not been assigned," she informed the crowd, and his heart sank.

Then she went on. "Jonas has been *selected*."

He blinked. What did that mean? He felt a collective, questioning stir from the audience. They, too, were puzzled.

In a firm, commanding voice she announced, “Jonas has been selected to be our next Receiver of Memory.”

Then he heard the gasp—the sudden intake of breath, drawn sharply in astonishment, by each of the seated citizens. He saw their faces; the eyes widened in awe.

And still he did not understand.

“Such a selection is very, very rare,” the Chief Elder told the audience. “Our community has only one Receiver. It is he who trains his successor.

“We have had our current Receiver for a very long time,” she went on. Jonas followed her eyes and saw that she was looking at one of the Elders. The Committee of Elders was sitting together in a group; and the Chief Elder’s eyes were now on one who sat in the midst but seemed oddly separate from them. It was a man Jonas had never noticed before, a bearded man with pale eyes. He was watching Jonas intently.

“We failed in our last selection,” the Chief Elder said solemnly. “It was ten years ago, when Jonas was just a toddler. I will not dwell on the experience because it causes us all terrible discomfort.”

Jonas didn’t know what she was referring to, but he could sense the discomfort of the audience. They shifted uneasily in their seats.

“We have not been hasty this time,” she continued. “We could not afford another failure.”

“Sometimes,” she went on, speaking now in a lighter tone, relaxing the tension in the Auditorium, “we are not entirely certain about the Assignments, even after the most painstaking observations. Sometimes we worry that the one assigned might not develop, through training, every attribute necessary. Elevens are still children, after all. What we observe as playfulness and patience—the requirements to become Nurturer—could, with maturity, be revealed as simply foolishness and indolence. So we continue to observe during training, and to modify behavior when necessary.

“But the Receiver-in-training cannot be observed, cannot be modified. That is stated quite clearly in the rules. He is to be alone, apart, while he is prepared by the current Receiver for the job which is the most honored in our community.”

Alone? Apart? Jonas listened with increasing unease.

“Therefore the selection must be sound. It must be a unanimous choice of the Committee. They can have no doubts, however fleeting. If, during

the process, an Elder reports a dream of uncertainty, that dream has the power to set a candidate aside instantly.

"Jonas was identified as a possible Receiver many years ago. We have observed him meticulously. There were no dreams of uncertainty.

"He has shown all of the qualities that a Receiver must have."

With her hand still firmly on his shoulder, the Chief Elder listed the qualities.

"*Intelligence,*" she said. "We are all aware that Jonas has been a top student throughout his school days.

"*Integrity,*" she said next. "Jonas has, like all of us, committed minor transgressions." She smiled at him. "We expect that. We hoped, also, that he would present himself promptly for chastisement, and he has always done so.

"*Courage,*" she went on. "Only one of us here today has ever undergone the rigorous training required of a Receiver. He, of course, is the most important member of the Committee: the current Receiver. It was he who reminded us, again and again, of the courage required.

"Jonas," she said, turning to him, but speaking in a voice that the entire community could hear, "the training required of you involves pain. Physical pain."

He felt fear flutter within him.

"You have never experienced that. Yes, you have scraped your knees in falls from your bicycle. Yes, you crushed your finger in a door last year."

Jonas nodded, agreeing, as he recalled the incident, and its accompanying misery.

"But you will be faced, now," she explained gently, "with pain of a magnitude that none of us here can comprehend because it is beyond our experience. The Receiver himself was not able to describe it, only to remind us that you would be faced with it, that you would need immense courage. We cannot prepare you for that.

"But we feel certain that you are brave," she said to him.

He did not feel brave at all. Not now.

"The fourth essential attribute," the Chief Elder said, "is *wisdom.* Jonas has not yet acquired that. The acquisition of wisdom will come through his training.

"We are convinced that Jonas has the ability to acquire wisdom. That is what we looked for.

“Finally, The Receiver must have one more quality, and it is one which I can only name, but not describe. I do not understand it. You members of the community will not understand it, either. Perhaps Jonas will, because the current Receiver has told us that Jonas already has this quality. He calls it the Capacity to See Beyond.”

The Chief Elder looked at Jonas with a question in her eyes. The audience watched him, too. They were silent.

For a moment he froze, consumed with despair. He *didn’t* have it, the whatever-she-had-said. He didn’t know what it was. Now was the moment when he would have to confess, to say, “No, I don’t. I *can’t*,” and throw himself on their mercy, ask their forgiveness, to explain that he had been wrongly chosen, that he was not the right one at all.

But when he looked out across the crowd, the sea of faces, the thing happened again. The thing that had happened with the apple.

They *changed*.

He blinked, and it was gone. His shoulders straightened slightly. Briefly he felt a tiny sliver of sureness for the first time.

She was still watching him. They all were.

“I think it’s true,” he told the Chief Elder and the community. “I don’t understand it yet. I don’t know what it is. But sometimes I see something. And maybe it’s beyond.”

She took her arm from his shoulders.

“Jonas,” she said, speaking not to him alone but to the entire community of which he was a part, “you will be trained to be our next Receiver of Memory. We thank you for your childhood.”

Then she turned and left the stage, left him there alone, standing and facing the crowd, which began spontaneously the collective murmur of his name.

“Jonas.” It was a whisper at first: hushed, barely audible. “Jonas. Jonas.”

Then louder, faster. “JONAS. JONAS. JONAS.”

With the chant, Jonas knew, the community was accepting him and his new role, giving him life, the way they had given it to the newchild Caleb. His heart swelled with gratitude and pride.

But at the same time he was filled with fear. He did not know what his selection meant. He did not know what he was to become.

Or what would become of him.

Nine

NOW, FOR THE first time in his twelve years of life, Jonas felt separate, different. He remembered what the Chief Elder had said: that his training would be alone and apart.

But his training had not yet begun and already, upon leaving the Auditorium, he felt the apartness. Holding the folder she had given him, he made his way through the throng, looking for his family unit and for Asher. People moved aside for him. They watched him. He thought he could hear whispers.

"Ash!" he called, spotting his friend near the rows of bicycles. "Ride back with me?"

"Sure." Asher smiled, his usual smile, friendly and familiar. But Jonas felt a moment of hesitation from his friend, an uncertainty.

"Congratulations," Asher said.

"You too," Jonas replied. "It was really funny, when she told about the smacks. You got more applause than almost anybody else."

The other new Twelves clustered nearby, placing their folders carefully into the carrying containers on the backs of the bikes. In each dwelling tonight they would be studying the instructions for the beginning of their training. Each night for years the children had memorized the required lessons for school, often yawning with boredom. Tonight they would all begin eagerly to memorize the rules for their adult Assignments.

"Congratulations, Asher!" someone called. Then that hesitation again. "You too, Jonas!"

Asher and Jonas responded with congratulations to their groupmates. Jonas saw his parents watching him from the place where their own bicycles were waiting. Lily had already been strapped into her seat.

He waved. They waved back, smiling, but he noticed that Lily was watching him solemnly, her thumb in her mouth.

He rode directly to his dwelling, exchanging only small jokes and unimportant remarks with Asher.

"See you in the morning, Recreation Director!" he called, dismounting by his door as Asher continued on.

“Right! See you!” Asher called back. Once again, there was just a moment when things weren’t quite the same, weren’t quite as they had always been through the long friendship. Perhaps he had imagined it. Things couldn’t change, with Asher.

The evening meal was quieter than usual. Lily chattered about her plans for volunteer work; she would begin, she said, at the Nurturing Center, since she was already an expert at feeding Gabriel.

“I know,” she added quickly, when her father gave her a warning glance, “I won’t mention his name. I know I’m not supposed to know his name.

“I can’t wait for tomorrow to come,” she said happily.

Jonas sighed uneasily. “I can,” he muttered.

“You’ve been greatly honored,” his mother said. “Your father and I are very proud.”

“It’s the most important job in the community,” Father said.

“But just the other night, you said that the job of making Assignments was the most important!”

Mother nodded. “This is different. It’s not a *job*, really. I never thought, never expected—” She paused. “There’s only one Receiver.”

“But the Chief Elder said that they had made a selection before, and that it failed. What was she talking about?”

Both of his parents hesitated. Finally his father described the previous selection. “It was very much as it was today, Jonas—the same suspense, as one Eleven had been passed over when the Assignments were given. Then the announcement, when they singled out the one—”

Jonas interrupted. “What was his name?”

His mother replied, “Her, not his. It was a female. But we are never to speak the name, or to use it again for a newchild.”

Jonas was shocked. A name designated Not-to-Be-Spoken indicated the highest degree of disgrace.

“What happened to her?” he asked nervously.

But his parents looked blank. “We don’t know,” his father said uncomfortably. “We never saw her again.”

A silence fell over the room. They looked at each other. Finally his mother, rising from the table, said, “You’ve been greatly honored, Jonas. Greatly honored.”

Alone in his sleepingroom, prepared for bed, Jonas opened his folder at last. Some of the other Twelves, he had noticed, had been given folders thick with printed pages. He imagined Benjamin, the scientific male in his group, beginning to read pages of rules and instructions with relish. He pictured Fiona smiling her gentle smile as she bent over the lists of duties and methods that she would be required to learn in the days to come.

But his own folder was startlingly close to empty. Inside there was only a single printed sheet. He read it twice.

JONAS
RECEIVER OF MEMORY

1. Go immediately at the end of school hours each day to the Annex entrance behind the House of the Old and present yourself to the attendant.
2. Go immediately to your dwelling at the conclusion of Training Hours each day.
3. From this moment you are exempted from rules governing rudeness. You may ask any question of any citizen and you will receive answers.
4. Do not discuss your training with any other member of the community, including parents and Elders.
5. From this moment you are prohibited from dream-telling.
6. Except for illness or injury unrelated to your training, do not apply for any medication.
7. You are not permitted to apply for release.
8. You may lie.

Jonas was stunned. What would happen to his friendships? His mindless hours playing ball, or riding his bike along the river? Those had been happy and vital times for him. Were they to be completely taken from him, now? The simple logistic instructions—where to go, and when—were expected. Every Twelve had to be told, of course, where and how and when to report for training. But he was a little dismayed that his schedule left no time, apparently, for recreation.

The exemption from rudeness startled him. Reading it again, however, he realized that it didn't compel him to be rude; it simply allowed him the option. He was quite certain he would never take advantage of it. He was so completely, so thoroughly accustomed to courtesy within the community that the thought of asking another citizen an intimate question, of calling someone's attention to an area of awkwardness, was unnerving.

The prohibition of dream-telling, he thought, would not be a real problem. He dreamed so rarely that the dream-telling did not come easily to him anyway, and he was glad to be excused from it. He wondered briefly, though, how to deal with it at the morning meal. What if he *did* dream—should he simply tell his family unit, as he did so often, anyway, that he hadn't? That would be a lie. Still, the final rule said . . . well, he wasn't quite ready to think about the final rule on the page.

The restriction of medication unnerved him. Medication was always available to citizens, even to children, through their parents. When he had crushed his finger in the door, he had quickly, gasping into the speaker, notified his mother; she had hastily requisitioned relief-of-pain medication which had promptly been delivered to his dwelling. Almost instantly the excruciating pain in his hand had diminished to the throb which was, now, all he could recall of the experience.

Re-reading rule number 6, he realized that a crushed finger fell into the category of "unrelated to training." So if it ever happened again—and he was quite certain it wouldn't; he had been very careful near heavy doors since the accident!—he could still receive medication.

The pill he took now, each morning, was also unrelated to training. So he would continue to receive the pill.

But he remembered uneasily what the Chief Elder had said about the pain that would come with his training. She had called it indescribable.

Jonas swallowed hard, trying without success to imagine what such pain might be like, with no medication at all. But it was beyond his comprehension.

He felt no reaction to rule number 7 at all. It had never occurred to him that under any circumstances, ever, he might apply for release.

Finally he steeled himself to read the final rule again. He had been trained since earliest childhood, since his earliest learning of language, never to lie. It was an integral part of the learning of precise speech. Once,

when he had been a Four, he had said, just prior to the midday meal at school, “I’m starving.”

Immediately he had been taken aside for a brief private lesson in language precision. He was not starving, it was pointed out. He was *hungry*. No one in the community was starving, had ever been starving, would ever be starving. To say “starving” was to speak a lie. An unintentioned lie, of course. But the reason for precision of language was to ensure that unintentional lies were never uttered. Did he understand that? they asked him. And he had.

He had never, within his memory, been tempted to lie. Asher did not lie. Lily did not lie. His parents did not lie. No one did. Unless . . .

Now Jonas had a thought that he had never had before. This new thought was frightening. What if *others—adults*—had, upon becoming Twelves, received in *their* instructions the same terrifying sentence?

What if they had all been instructed: *You may lie?*

His mind reeled. Now, empowered to ask questions of utmost rudeness—and promised answers—he *could,* conceivably (though it was almost unimaginable), ask someone, some adult, his father perhaps: “Do you lie?”

But he would have no way of knowing if the answer he received were true.

Ten

"I GO IN HERE, Jonas," Fiona told him when they reached the front door of the House of the Old after parking their bicycles in the designated area.

"I don't know why I'm nervous," she confessed. "I've been here so often before." She turned her folder over in her hands.

"Well, everything's different now," Jonas reminded her.

"Even the nameplates on our bikes," Fiona laughed. During the night the nameplate of each new Twelve had been removed by the Maintenance Crew and replaced with the style that indicated citizen-in-training.

"I don't want to be late," she said hastily, and started up the steps. "If we finish at the same time, I'll ride home with you."

Jonas nodded, waved to her, and headed around the building toward the Annex, a small wing attached to the back. He certainly didn't want to be late for his first day of training, either.

The Annex was very ordinary, its door unremarkable. He reached for the heavy handle, then noticed a buzzer on the wall. So he buzzed instead.

"Yes?" The voice came through a small speaker above the buzzer.

"It's, uh, Jonas. I'm the new—I mean—"

"Come in." A click indicated that the door had been unlatched.

The lobby was very small and contained only a desk at which a female Attendant sat working on some papers. She looked up when he entered; then, to his surprise, she stood. It was a small thing, the standing; but no one had ever stood automatically to acknowledge Jonas's presence before.

"Welcome, Receiver of Memory," she said respectfully.

"Oh, please," he replied uncomfortably. "Call me Jonas."

She smiled, pushed a button, and he heard a click that unlocked the door to her left. "You may go right on in," she told him.

Then she seemed to notice his discomfort and to realize its origin. No doors in the community were locked, ever. None that Jonas knew of, anyway.

"The locks are simply to insure The Receiver's privacy because he needs concentration," she explained. "It would be difficult if citizens wandered in, looking for the Department of Bicycle Repair, or something."

Jonas laughed, relaxing a little. The woman seemed very friendly, and it was true—in fact it was a joke throughout the community—that the Department of Bicycle Repair, an unimportant little office, was relocated so often that no one ever knew where it was.

"There is nothing dangerous here," she told him.

"But," she added, glancing at the wall clock, "he doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Jonas hurried through the door and found himself in a comfortably furnished living area. It was not unlike his own family unit's dwelling. Furniture was standard throughout the community: practical, sturdy, the function of each piece clearly defined. A bed for sleeping. A table for eating. A desk for studying.

All of those things were in this spacious room, though each was slightly different from those in his own dwelling. The fabrics on the upholstered chairs and sofa were slightly thicker and more luxurious; the table legs were not straight like those at home, but slender and curved, with a small carved decoration at the foot. The bed, in an alcove at the far end of the room, was draped with a splendid cloth embroidered over its entire surface with intricate designs.

But the most conspicuous difference was the books. In his own dwelling, there were the necessary reference volumes that each household contained: a dictionary, and the thick community volume which contained descriptions of every office, factory, building, and committee. And the Book of Rules, of course.

The books in his own dwelling were the only books that Jonas had ever seen. He had never known that other books existed.

But this room's walls were completely covered by bookcases, filled, which reached to the ceiling. There must have been hundreds—perhaps thousands—of books, their titles embossed in shiny letters.

Jonas stared at them. He couldn't imagine what the thousands of pages contained. Could there be rules beyond the rules that governed the community? Could there be more descriptions of offices and factories and committees?

He had only a second to look around because he was aware that the man sitting in a chair beside the table was watching him. Hastily he moved forward, stood before the man, bowed slightly, and said, "I'm Jonas."

"I know. Welcome, Receiver of Memory."

Jonas recognized the man. He was the Elder who had seemed separate from the others at the Ceremony, though he was dressed in the same special clothing that only Elders wore.

Jonas looked self-consciously into the pale eyes that mirrored his own.

"Sir, I apologize for my lack of understanding . . ."

He waited, but the man did not give the standard accepting-of-apology response.

After a moment, Jonas went on, "But I thought—I mean I *think*," he corrected, reminding himself that if precision of language were ever to be important, it was certainly important *now*, in the presence of this man, "that *you* are the Receiver of Memory. I'm only, well, I was only assigned, I mean selected, yesterday. I'm not anything at all. Not yet."

The man looked at him thoughtfully, silently. It was a look that combined interest, curiosity, concern, and perhaps a little sympathy as well.

Finally he spoke. "Beginning today, this moment, at least to me, you are The Receiver.

"I have been The Receiver for a long time. A very, very long time. You can see that, can't you?"

Jonas nodded. The man was wrinkled, and his eyes, though piercing in their unusual lightness, seemed tired. The flesh around them was darkened into shadowed circles.

"I can see that you are very old," Jonas responded with respect. The Old were always given the highest respect.

The man smiled. He touched the sagging flesh on his own face with amusement. "I am not, actually, as old as I look," he told Jonas. "This job has aged me. I know I look as if I should be scheduled for release very soon. But actually I have a good deal of time left.

"I was pleased, though, when you were selected. It took them a long time. The failure of the previous selection was ten years ago, and my energy is starting to diminish. I need what strength I have remaining for your training. We have hard and painful work to do, you and I.

"Please sit down," he said, and gestured toward the nearby chair. Jonas lowered himself onto the soft cushioned seat.

The man closed his eyes and continued speaking. "When I became a Twelve, I was selected, as you were. I was frightened, as I'm sure you are." He opened his eyes for a moment and peered at Jonas, who nodded.

The eyes closed again. “I came to this very room to begin my training. It was such a long time ago.

“The previous Receiver seemed just as old to me as I do to you. He was just as tired as I am today.”

He sat forward suddenly, opened his eyes, and said, “You may ask questions. I have so little experience in describing this process. It is forbidden to talk of it.”

“I know, sir. I have read the instructions,” Jonas said.

“So I may neglect to make things as clear as I should.” The man chuckled. “My job is important and has enormous honor. But that does not mean I am perfect, and when I tried before to train a successor, I failed. Please ask any questions that will help you.”

In his mind, Jonas had questions. A thousand. A *million* questions. As many questions as there were books lining the walls. But he did not ask one, not yet.

The man sighed, seeming to put his thoughts in order. Then he spoke again. “Simply stated,” he said, “although it’s not really simple at all, my job is to transmit to you all the memories I have within me. Memories of the past.”

“Sir,” Jonas said tentatively, “I would be very interested to hear the story of your life, and to listen to your memories.

“I apologize for interrupting,” he added quickly.

The man waved his hand impatiently. “No apologies in this room. We haven’t time.”

“Well,” Jonas went on, uncomfortably aware that he might be interrupting again, “I am really interested, I don’t mean that I’m not. But I don’t exactly understand why it’s so important. I could do some adult job in the community, and in my recreation time I could come and listen to the stories from your childhood. I’d like that. Actually,” he added, “I’ve done that already, in the House of the Old. The Old like to tell about their childhoods, and it’s always fun to listen.”

The man shook his head. “No, no,” he said. “I’m not being clear. It’s not my past, not my childhood that I must transmit to you.”

He leaned back, resting his head against the back of the upholstered chair. “It’s the memories of the whole world,” he said with a sigh. “Before you, before me, before the previous Receiver, and generations before him.”

Jonas frowned. “The whole world?” he asked. “I don’t understand. Do you mean not just us? Not just the community? Do you mean Elsewhere, too?” He tried, in his mind, to grasp the concept. “I’m sorry, sir. I don’t understand exactly. Maybe I’m not smart enough. I don’t know what you mean when you say ‘the whole world’ or ‘generations before him.’ I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now.”

“There’s much more. There’s all that goes beyond—all that is Elsewhere—and all that goes back, and back, and back. I received all of those, when I was selected. And here in this room, all alone, I re-experience them again and again. It is how wisdom comes. And how we shape our future.”

He rested for a moment, breathing deeply. “I am so *weighted* with them,” he said.

Jonas felt a terrible concern for the man, suddenly.

“It’s as if . . .” The man paused, seeming to search his mind for the right words of description. “It’s like going downhill through deep snow on a sled,” he said, finally. “At first it’s exhilarating: the speed; the sharp, clear air; but then the snow accumulates, builds up on the runners, and you slow, you have to push hard to keep going, and—”

He shook his head suddenly, and peered at Jonas. “That meant nothing to you, did it?” he asked.

Jonas was confused. “I didn’t understand it, sir.”

“Of course you didn’t. You don’t know what snow is, do you?”

Jonas shook his head.

“Or a sled? Runners?”

“No, sir,” Jonas said.

“Downhill? The term means nothing to you?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“Well, it’s a place to start. I’d been wondering how to begin. Move to the bed, and lie face down. Remove your tunic first.”

Jonas did so, a little apprehensively. Beneath his bare chest, he felt the soft folds of the magnificent cloth that covered the bed. He watched as the man rose and moved first to the wall where the speaker was. It was the same sort of speaker that occupied a place in every dwelling, but one thing about it was different. This one had a switch, which the man deftly snapped to the end that said OFF.

Jonas almost gasped aloud. To have the power to turn the speaker *off!* It was an astonishing thing.

Then the man moved with surprising quickness to the corner where the bed was. He sat on a chair beside Jonas, who was motionless, waiting for what would happen next.

“Close your eyes. Relax. This will not be painful.”

Jonas remembered that he was allowed, that he had even been encouraged, to ask questions. “What are you going to do, sir?” he asked, hoping that his voice didn’t betray his nervousness.

“I am going to transmit the memory of snow,” the old man said, and placed his hands on Jonas’s bare back.

Eleven

JONAS FELT NOTHING unusual at first. He felt only the light touch of the old man's hands on his back.

He tried to relax, to breathe evenly. The room was absolutely silent, and for a moment Jonas feared that he might disgrace himself now, on the first day of his training, by falling asleep.

Then he shivered. He realized that the touch of the hands felt, suddenly, cold. At the same instant, breathing in, he felt the air change, and his very breath was cold. He licked his lips, and in doing so, his tongue touched the suddenly chilled air.

It was very startling; but he was not at all frightened, now. He was filled with energy, and he breathed again, feeling the sharp intake of frigid air. Now, too, he could feel cold air swirling around his entire body. He felt it blow against his hands where they lay at his sides, and over his back.

The touch of the man's hands seemed to have disappeared.

Now he became aware of an entirely new sensation: pinpricks? No, because they were soft and without pain. Tiny, cold, featherlike feelings peppered his body and face. He put out his tongue again, and caught one of the dots of cold upon it. It disappeared from his awareness instantly; but he caught another, and another. The sensation made him smile.

One part of his consciousness knew that he was still lying there, on the bed, in the Annex room. Yet another, separate part of his being was upright now, in a sitting position, and beneath him he could feel that he was not on the soft decorated bedcovering at all, but rather seated on a flat, hard surface. His hands now held (though at the same time they were still motionless at his sides) a rough, damp rope.

And he could *see*, though his eyes were closed. He could see a bright, whirling torrent of crystals in the air around him, and he could see them gather on the backs of his hands, like cold fur.

His breath was visible.

Beyond, through the swirl of what he now, somehow, perceived was the thing the old man had spoken of—*snow*—he could look out and down a great distance. He was up high someplace. The ground was thick with the furry snow, but he sat slightly above it on a hard, flat object.

Sled, he knew abruptly. He was sitting on a thing called *sled*. And the sled itself seemed to be poised at the top of a long, extended mound that rose from the very land where he was. Even as he thought the word "mound," his new consciousness told him *hill*.

Then the sled, with Jonas himself upon it, began to move through the snowfall, and he understood instantly that now he was going downhill. No voice made an explanation. The experience explained itself to him.

His face cut through the frigid air as he began the descent, moving through the substance called snow on the vehicle called sled, which propelled itself on what he now knew without doubt to be *runners*.

Comprehending all of those things as he sped downward, he was free to enjoy the breathless glee that overwhelmed him: the speed, the clear cold air, the total silence, the feeling of balance and excitement and peace.

Then, as the angle of incline lessened, as the mound—the *hill*—flattened, nearing the bottom, the sled's forward motion slowed. The snow was piled now around it, and he pushed with his body, moving it forward, not wanting the exhilarating ride to end.

Finally the obstruction of the piled snow was too much for the thin runners of the sled, and he came to a stop. He sat there for a moment, panting, holding the rope in his cold hands. Tentatively he opened his eyes—not his snow–hill–sled eyes, for they had been open throughout the strange ride. He opened his ordinary eyes, and saw that he was still on the bed, that he had not moved at all.

The old man, still beside the bed, was watching him. "How do you feel?" he asked.

Jonas sat up and tried to answer honestly. "Surprised," he said, after a moment.

The old man wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "Whew," he said. "It was exhausting. But you know, even transmitting that tiny memory to you—I think it lightened me just a little."

"Do you mean—you did say I could ask questions?"

The man nodded, encouraging his question.

"Do you mean that now you don't have the memory of it—of that ride on the sled—anymore?"

"That's right. A little weight off this old body."

"But it was such fun! And now you don't have it anymore! I *took* it from you!"

But the old man laughed. “All I gave you was one ride, on one sled, in one snow, on one hill. I have a whole world of them in my memory. I could give them to you one by one, a thousand times, and there would still be more.”

“Are you saying that I—I mean we—could do it again?” Jonas asked. “I’d really like to. I think I could steer, by pulling the rope. I didn’t try this time, because it was so new.”

The old man, laughing, shook his head. “Maybe another day, for a treat. But there’s no time, really, just to play. I only wanted to begin by showing you how it works.

“Now,” he said, turning businesslike, “lie back down. I want to—”

Jonas did. He was eager for whatever experience would come next. But he had, suddenly, so many questions.

“Why don’t we have snow, and sleds, and hills?” he asked. “And when did we, in the past? Did my parents have sleds when they were young? Did you?”

The old man shrugged and gave a short laugh. “No,” he told Jonas. “It’s a very distant memory. That’s why it was so exhausting—I had to tug it forward from many generations back. It was given to me when I was a new Receiver, and the previous Receiver had to pull it through a long time period, too.”

“But what happened to those things? Snow, and the rest of it?”

“Climate Control. Snow made growing food difficult, limited the agricultural periods. And unpredictable weather made transportation almost impossible at times. It wasn’t a practical thing, so it became obsolete when we went to Sameness.

“And hills, too,” he added. “They made conveyance of goods unwieldy. Trucks; buses. Slowed them down. So—” He waved his hand, as if a gesture had caused hills to disappear. “Sameness,” he concluded.

Jonas frowned. “I wish we had those things, still. Just now and then.”

The old man smiled. “So do I,” he said. “But that choice is not ours.”

“But sir,” Jonas suggested, “since you have so much power—”

The man corrected him. “Honor,” he said firmly. “I have great honor. So will you. But you will find that that is not the same as power.

“Lie quietly now. Since we’ve entered into the topic of climate, let me give you something else. And this time I’m not going to tell you the name of it, because I want to test the receiving. You should be able to perceive

the name without being told. I gave away snow and sled and downhill and runners by telling them to you in advance."

Without being instructed, Jonas closed his eyes again. He felt the hands on his back again. He waited.

Now it came more quickly, the feelings. This time the hands didn't become cold, but instead began to feel warm on his body. They moistened a little. The warmth spread, extending across his shoulders, up his neck, onto the side of his face. He could feel it through his clothed parts, too: a pleasant, all-over sensation; and when he licked his lips this time, the air was hot and heavy.

He didn't move. There was no sled. His posture didn't change. He was simply alone someplace, out of doors, lying down, and the warmth came from far above. It was not as exciting as the ride through the snowy air; but it was pleasurable and comforting.

Suddenly he perceived the word for it: *sunshine*. He perceived that it came from the sky.

Then it ended.

"Sunshine," he said aloud, opening his eyes.

"Good. You did get the word. That makes my job easier. Not so much explaining."

"And it came from the sky."

"That's right," the old man said. "Just the way it used to."

"Before Sameness. Before Climate Control," Jonas added.

The man laughed. "You receive well, and learn quickly. I'm very pleased with you. That's enough for today, I think. We're off to a good start."

There was a question bothering Jonas. "Sir," he said, "The Chief Elder told me—she told everyone—and you told me, too, that it would be painful. So I was a little scared. But it didn't hurt at all. I really enjoyed it." He looked quizzically at the old man.

The man sighed. "I started you with memories of pleasure. My previous failure gave me the wisdom to do that." He took a few deep breaths. "Jonas," he said, "it *will* be painful. But it need not be painful yet."

"I'm brave. I really am." Jonas sat up a little straighter.

The old man looked at him for a moment. He smiled. "I can see that," he said. "Well, since you asked the question—I think I have enough energy for one more transmission.

“Lie down once more. This will be the last today.”

Jonas obeyed cheerfully. He closed his eyes, waiting, and felt the hands again; then he felt the warmth again, the sunshine again, coming from the sky of this other consciousness that was so new to him. This time, as he lay basking in the wonderful warmth, he felt the passage of time. His real self was aware that it was only a minute or two; but his other, memory-receiving self felt hours pass in the sun. His skin began to sting. Restlessly he moved one arm, bending it, and felt a sharp pain in the crease of his inner arm at the elbow.

“Ouch,” he said loudly, and shifted on the bed. “Owwww,” he said, wincing at the shift, and even moving his mouth to speak made his face hurt.

He knew there was a word, but the pain kept him from grasping it.

Then it ended. He opened his eyes, wincing with discomfort. “It hurt,” he told the man, “and I couldn’t get the word for it.”

“It was sunburn,” the old man told him.

“It hurt a *lot*,” Jonas said, “but I’m glad you gave it to me. It was interesting. And now I understand better, what it meant, that there would be pain.”

The man didn’t respond. He sat silently for a second. Finally he said, “Get up, now. It’s time for you to go home.”

They both walked to the center of the room. Jonas put his tunic back on. “Goodbye, sir,” he said. “Thank you for my first day.”

The old man nodded to him. He looked drained, and a little sad.

“Sir?” Jonas said shyly.

“Yes? Do you have a question?”

“It’s just that I don’t know your name. I thought you were The Receiver, but you say that now *I’m* The Receiver. So I don’t know what to call you.”

The man had sat back down in the comfortable upholstered chair. He moved his shoulders around as if to ease away an aching sensation. He seemed terribly weary.

“Call me The Giver,” he told Jonas.

Twelve

"YOU SLEPT SOUNDLY, Jonas?" his mother asked at the morning meal. "No dreams?"

Jonas simply smiled and nodded, not ready to lie, not willing to tell the truth. "I slept very soundly," he said.

"I wish this one would," his father said, leaning down from his chair to touch Gabriel's waving fist. The basket was on the floor beside him; in its corner, beside Gabriel's head, the stuffed hippo sat staring with its blank eyes.

"So do I," Mother said, rolling her eyes. "He's so fretful at night."

Jonas had not heard the newchild during the night because as always, he *had* slept soundly. But it was not true that he had no dreams.

Again and again, as he slept, he had slid down that snow-covered hill. Always, in the dream, it seemed as if there were a destination: a *something*—he could not grasp what—that lay beyond the place where the thickness of snow brought the sled to a stop.

He was left, upon awakening, with the feeling that he wanted, even somehow needed, to reach the something that waited in the distance. The feeling that it was good. That it was welcoming. That it was significant.

But he did not know how to get there.

He tried to shed the leftover dream, gathering his schoolwork and preparing for the day.

School seemed a little different today. The classes were the same: language and communications; commerce and industry; science and technology; civil procedures and government. But during the breaks for recreation periods and the midday meal, the other new Twelves were abuzz with descriptions of their first day of training. All of them talked at once, interrupting each other, hastily making the required apology for interrupting, then forgetting again in the excitement of describing the new experiences.

Jonas listened. He was very aware of his own admonition not to discuss his training. But it would have been impossible, anyway. There was no way to describe to his friends what he had experienced there in the Annex room. How could you describe a sled without describing a hill and snow;

and how could you describe a hill and snow to someone who had never felt height or wind or that feathery, magical cold?

Even trained for years as they all had been in precision of language, what words could you use which would give another the experience of sunshine?

So it was easy for Jonas to be still and to listen.

After school hours he rode again beside Fiona to the House of the Old.

"I looked for you yesterday," she told him, "so we could ride home together. Your bike was still there, and I waited for a little while. But it was getting late, so I went on home."

"I apologize for making you wait," Jonas said.

"I accept your apology," she replied automatically.

"I stayed a little longer than I expected," Jonas explained.

She pedaled forward silently, and he knew that she expected him to tell her why. She expected him to describe his first day of training. But to ask would have fallen into the category of rudeness.

"You've been doing so many volunteer hours with the Old," Jonas said, changing the subject. "There won't be much that you don't already know."

"Oh, there's lots to learn," Fiona replied. "There's administrative work, and the dietary rules, and punishment for disobedience—did you know that they use a discipline wand on the Old, the same as for small children? And there's occupational therapy, and recreational activities, and medications, and—"

They reached the building and braked their bikes.

"I really think I'll like it better than school," Fiona confessed.

"Me too," Jonas agreed, wheeling his bike into its place.

She waited for a second, as if, again, she expected him to go on. Then she looked at her watch, waved, and hurried toward the entrance.

Jonas stood for a moment beside his bike, startled. It had happened again: the thing that he thought of now as "seeing beyond." This time it had been Fiona who had undergone that fleeting indescribable change. As he looked up and toward her going through the door, it happened; she changed. Actually, Jonas thought, trying to recreate it in his mind, it wasn't Fiona in her entirety. It seemed to be just her hair. And just for that flickering instant.

He ran through it in his mind. It was clearly beginning to happen more often. First, the apple a few weeks before. The next time had been the

faces in the audience at the Auditorium, just two days ago. Now, today, Fiona's hair.

Frowning, Jonas walked toward the Annex. I will ask The Giver, he decided.

The old man looked up, smiling, when Jonas entered the room. He was already seated beside the bed, and he seemed more energetic today, slightly renewed, and glad to see Jonas.

"Welcome," he said. "We must get started. You're one minute late."

"I apologi—" Jonas began, and then stopped, flustered, remembering there were to be no apologies.

He removed his tunic and went to the bed. "I'm one minute late because something happened," he explained. "And I'd like to ask you about it, if you don't mind."

"You may ask me anything."

Jonas tried to sort it out in his mind so that he could explain it clearly. "I think it's what you call seeing-beyond," he said.

The Giver nodded. "Describe it," he said.

Jonas told him about the experience with the apple. Then the moment on the stage, when he had looked out and seen the same phenomenon in the faces of the crowd.

"Then today, just now, outside, it happened with my friend Fiona. She herself didn't change, exactly. But something about her changed for a second. Her hair looked different; but not in its shape, not in its length. I can't quite—" Jonas paused, frustrated by his inability to grasp and describe exactly what *had* occurred.

Finally he simply said, "It changed. I don't know how, or why.

"That's why I was one minute late," he concluded, and looked questioningly at The Giver.

To his surprise, the old man asked him a question which seemed unrelated to the seeing-beyond. "When I gave you the memory yesterday, the first one, the ride on the sled, did you look around?"

Jonas nodded. "Yes," he said, "but the stuff—I mean the snow—in the air made it hard to see anything."

"Did you look at the sled?"

Jonas thought back. "No. I only felt it under me. I dreamed of it last night, too. But I don't remember *seeing* the sled in my dream, either. Just feeling it."

The Giver seemed to be thinking.

"When I was observing you, before the selection, I perceived that you probably had the capacity, and what you describe confirms that. It happened somewhat differently to me," The Giver told him. "When I was just your age—about to become the new Receiver—I began to experience it, though it took a different form. With me it was . . . well, I won't describe that now; you wouldn't understand it yet.

"But I think I can guess how it's happening with you. Let me just make a little test, to confirm my guess. Lie down."

Jonas lay on the bed again with his hands at his sides. He felt comfortable here now. He closed his eyes and waited for the familiar feel of The Giver's hands on his back.

But it didn't come. Instead, The Giver instructed him, "Call back the memory of the ride on the sled. Just the *beginning* of it, where you're at the top of the hill, before the slide starts. And this time, look down at the sled."

Jonas was puzzled. He opened his eyes. "Excuse me," he asked politely, "but don't *you* have to give me the memory?"

"It's your memory, now. It's not mine to experience any longer. I gave it away."

"But how can I call it back?"

"You can remember last year, or the year that you were a Seven, or a Five, can't you?"

"Of course."

"It's much the same. Everyone in the community has one-generation memories like those. But now you will be able to go back farther. Try. Just concentrate."

Jonas closed his eyes again. He took a deep breath and sought the sled and the hill and the snow in his consciousness.

There they were, with no effort. He was again sitting in that whirling world of snowflakes, atop the hill.

Jonas grinned with delight, and blew his own steamy breath into view. Then, as he had been instructed, he looked down. He saw his own hands, furred again with snow, holding the rope. He saw his legs, and moved them aside for a glimpse of the sled beneath.

Dumbfounded, he stared at it. This time it was not a fleeting impression. This time the sled had—and continued to have, as he blinked, and stared at

it again—that same mysterious quality that the apple had had so briefly. And Fiona's hair. The sled did not change. It simply was—whatever the thing was.

Jonas opened his eyes and was still on the bed. The Giver was watching him curiously.

"Yes," Jonas said slowly. "I saw it, in the sled."

"Let me try one more thing. Look over there, to the bookcase. Do you see the very top row of books, the ones behind the table, on the top shelf?"

Jonas sought them with his eyes. He stared at them, and they changed. But the change was fleeting. It slipped away the next instant.

"It happened," Jonas said. "It happened to the books, but it went away again."

"I'm right, then," The Giver said. "You're beginning to see the color red."

"The what?"

The Giver sighed. "How to explain this? Once, back in the time of the memories, everything had a shape and size, the way things still do, but they also had a quality called *color*.

"There were a lot of colors, and one of them was called red. That's the one you are starting to see. Your friend Fiona has red hair—quite distinctive, actually; I've noticed it before. When you mentioned Fiona's hair, it was the clue that told me you were probably beginning to see the color red."

"And the faces of people? The ones I saw at the Ceremony?"

The Giver shook his head. "No, flesh isn't red. But it has red tones in it. There was a time, actually—you'll see this in the memories later—when flesh was many different colors. That was before we went to Sameness. Today flesh is all the same, and what you saw was the red tones. Probably when you saw the faces take on color it wasn't as deep or vibrant as the apple, or your friend's hair."

The Giver chuckled, suddenly. "We've never completely mastered Sameness. I suppose the genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out. Hair like Fiona's must drive them crazy."

Jonas listened, trying hard to comprehend. "And the sled?" he said. "It had that same thing: the color red. But it didn't *change,* Giver. It just *was*."

"Because it's a memory from the time when color *was*."

“It was so—oh, I wish language were more precise! The red was so beautiful!”

The Giver nodded. “It is.”

“Do you see it all the time?”

“I see all of them. All the colors.”

“Will I?”

“Of course. When you receive the memories. You have the capacity to see beyond. You’ll gain wisdom, then, along with colors. And lots more.”

Jonas wasn’t interested, just then, in wisdom. It was the colors that fascinated him. “Why can’t everyone see them? Why did colors disappear?”

The Giver shrugged. “Our people made that choice, the choice to go to Sameness. Before my time, before the previous time, back and back and back. We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences.” He thought for a moment. “We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others.”

“We shouldn’t have!” Jonas said fiercely.

The Giver looked startled at the certainty of Jonas’s reaction. Then he smiled wryly. “You’ve come very quickly to that conclusion,” he said. “It took me many years. Maybe your wisdom will come much more quickly than mine.”

He glanced at the wall clock. “Lie back down, now. We have so much to do.”

“Giver,” Jonas asked as he arranged himself again on the bed, “how did it happen to you when you were becoming The Receiver? You said that the seeing-beyond happened to you, but not the same way.”

The hands came to his back. “Another day,” The Giver said gently. “I’ll tell you another day. Now we must work. And I’ve thought of a way to help you with the concept of color.

“Close your eyes and be still, now. I’m going to give you a memory of a rainbow.”

Thirteen

DAYS WENT BY, and weeks. Jonas learned, through the memories, the names of colors; and now he began to see them all, in his ordinary life (though he knew it was ordinary no longer, and would never be again). But they didn't last. There would be a glimpse of green—the landscaped lawn around the Central Plaza; a bush on the riverbank. The bright orange of pumpkins being trucked in from the agricultural fields beyond the community boundary—seen in an instant, the flash of brilliant color, but gone again, returning to their flat and hueless shade.

The Giver told him that it would be a very long time before he had the colors to keep.

"But I want them!" Jonas said angrily. "It isn't fair that nothing has color!"

"Not fair?" The Giver looked at Jonas curiously. "Explain what you mean."

"Well . . ." Jonas had to stop and think it through. "If everything's the same, then there aren't any choices! I want to wake up in the morning and *decide* things! A blue tunic, or a red one?"

He looked down at himself, at the colorless fabric of his clothing. "But it's all the same, always."

Then he laughed a little. "I know it's not important, what you wear. It doesn't matter. But—"

"It's the choosing that's important, isn't it?" The Giver asked him.

Jonas nodded. "My little brother—" he began, and then corrected himself. "No, that's inaccurate. He's not my brother, not really. But this newchild that my family takes care of—his name's Gabriel?"

"Yes, I know about Gabriel."

"Well, he's right at the age where he's learning so much. He grabs toys when we hold them in front of him—my father says he's learning small-muscle control. And he's really cute."

The Giver nodded.

"But now that I can see colors, at least sometimes, I was just thinking: what if we could hold up things that were bright red, or bright yellow, and he could *choose?* Instead of the Sameness."

“He might make wrong choices.”

“Oh.” Jonas was silent for a minute. “Oh, I see what you mean. It wouldn’t matter for a newchild’s toy. But later it *does* matter, doesn’t it? We don’t dare to let people make choices of their own.”

“Not safe?” The Giver suggested.

“Definitely not safe,” Jonas said with certainty. “What if they were allowed to choose their own mate? And chose *wrong?*

“Or what if,” he went on, almost laughing at the absurdity, “they chose their own *jobs?*”

“Frightening, isn’t it?” The Giver said.

Jonas chuckled. “Very frightening. I can’t even imagine it. We really have to protect people from wrong choices.”

“It’s safer.”

“Yes,” Jonas agreed. “Much safer.”

But when the conversation turned to other things, Jonas was left, still, with a feeling of frustration that he didn’t understand.

He found that he was often angry, now: irrationally angry at his groupmates, that they were satisfied with their lives which had none of the vibrance his own was taking on. And he was angry at himself, that he could not change that for them.

He tried. Without asking permission from The Giver, because he feared —or knew—that it would be denied, he tried to give his new awareness to his friends.

“Asher,” Jonas said one morning, “look at those flowers very carefully.” They were standing beside a bed of geraniums planted near the Hall of Open Records. He put his hands on Asher’s shoulders, and concentrated on the red of the petals, trying to hold it as long as he could, and trying at the same time to transmit the awareness of red to his friend.

“What’s the matter?” Asher asked uneasily. “Is something wrong?” He moved away from Jonas’s hands. It was extremely rude for one citizen to touch another outside of family units.

“No, nothing. I thought for a minute that they were wilting, and we should let the Gardening Crew know they needed more watering.” Jonas sighed, and turned away.

One evening he came home from his training weighted with new knowledge. The Giver had chosen a startling and disturbing memory that day. Under the touch of his hands, Jonas had found himself suddenly in a

place that was completely alien: hot and windswept under a vast blue sky. There were tufts of sparse grass, a few bushes and rocks, and nearby he could see an area of thicker vegetation: broad, low trees outlined against the sky. He could hear noises: the sharp crack of weapons—he perceived the word *guns*—and then shouts, and an immense crashing thud as something fell, tearing branches from the trees.

He heard voices calling to one another. Peering from the place where he stood hidden behind some shrubbery, he was reminded of what The Giver had told him, that there had been a time when flesh had different colors. Two of these men had dark brown skin; the others were light. Going closer, he watched them hack the tusks from a motionless elephant on the ground and haul them away, spattered with blood. He felt himself overwhelmed with a new perception of the color he knew as red.

Then the men were gone, speeding toward the horizon in a vehicle that spit pebbles from its whirling tires. One hit his forehead and stung him there. But the memory continued, though Jonas ached now for it to end.

Now he saw another elephant emerge from the place where it had stood hidden in the trees. Very slowly it walked to the mutilated body and looked down. With its sinuous trunk it stroked the huge corpse; then it reached up, broke some leafy branches with a snap, and draped them over the mass of torn thick flesh.

Finally it tilted its massive head, raised its trunk, and roared into the empty landscape. Jonas had never heard such a sound. It was a sound of rage and grief and it seemed never to end.

He could still hear it when he opened his eyes and lay anguished on the bed where he received the memories. It continued to roar into his consciousness as he pedaled slowly home.

“Lily,” he asked that evening when his sister took her comfort object, the stuffed elephant, from the shelf, “did you know that once there really were elephants? Live ones?”

She glanced down at the ragged comfort object and grinned. “Right,” she said, skeptically. “Sure, Jonas.”

Jonas went and sat beside them while his father untied Lily’s hair ribbons and combed her hair. He placed one hand on each of their shoulders. With all of his being he tried to give each of them a piece of the memory: not of the tortured cry of the elephant, but of the *being* of the

elephant, of the towering, immense creature and the meticulous touch with which it had tended its friend at the end.

But his father had continued to comb Lily's long hair, and Lily, impatient, had finally wiggled under her brother's touch. "Jonas," she said, "you're *hurting* me with your hand."

"I apologize for hurting you, Lily," Jonas mumbled, and took his hand away.

"'Cept your apology," Lily responded indifferently, stroking the lifeless elephant.

"Giver," Jonas asked once, as they prepared for the day's work, "don't you have a spouse? Aren't you allowed to apply for one?" Although he was exempted from the rules against rudeness, he was aware that this was a rude question. But The Giver had encouraged all of his questions, not seeming to be embarrassed or offended by even the most personal.

The Giver chuckled. "No, there's no rule against it. And I did have a spouse. You're forgetting how old I am, Jonas. My former spouse lives now with the Childless Adults."

"Oh, of course." Jonas *had* forgotten The Giver's obvious age. When adults of the community became older, their lives became different. They were no longer needed to create family units. Jonas's own parents, when he and Lily were grown, would go to live with the Childless Adults.

"You'll be able to apply for a spouse, Jonas, if you want to. I'll warn you, though, that it will be difficult. Your living arrangements will have to be different from those of most family units, because the books are forbidden to citizens. You and I are the only ones with access to the books."

Jonas glanced around at the astonishing array of volumes. From time to time, now, he could see their colors. With their hours together, his and The Giver's, consumed by conversation and by the transmission of memories, Jonas had not yet opened any of the books. But he read the titles here and there, and knew that they contained all of the knowledge of centuries, and that one day they would belong to him.

"So if I have a spouse, and maybe children, I will have to hide the books from them?"

The Giver nodded. "I wasn't permitted to share the books with my spouse, that's correct. And there are other difficulties, too. You remember

the rule that says the new Receiver can't talk about his training?"

Jonas nodded. Of course he remembered. It had turned out, by far, to be the most frustrating of the rules he was required to obey.

"When you become the official Receiver, when we're finished here, you'll be given a whole new set of rules. Those are the rules that I obey. And it won't surprise you that I am forbidden to talk about my work to anyone except the new Receiver. That's you, of course.

"So there will be a whole part of your life which you won't be able to share with a family. It's hard, Jonas. It was hard for me.

"You do understand, don't you, that this *is* my life? The memories?"

Jonas nodded again, but he was puzzled. Didn't life consist of the things you did each day? There wasn't anything else, really. "I've seen you taking walks," he said.

The Giver sighed. "I walk. I eat at mealtime. And when I am called by the Committee of Elders, I appear before them, to give them counsel and advice."

"Do you advise them often?" Jonas was a little frightened at the thought that one day he would be the one to advise the ruling body.

But The Giver said no. "Rarely. Only when they are faced with something that they have not experienced before. Then they call upon me to use the memories and advise them. But it very seldom happens. Sometimes I wish they'd ask for my wisdom more often—there are so many things I could tell them; things I wish they would change. But they don't want change. Life here is so orderly, so predictable—so painless. It's what they've chosen."

"I don't know why they even *need* a Receiver, then, if they never call upon him," Jonas commented.

"They need me. And you," The Giver said, but didn't explain. "They were reminded of that ten years ago."

"What happened ten years ago?" Jonas asked. "Oh, I know. You tried to train a successor and it failed. Why? Why did that remind them?"

The Giver smiled grimly. "When the new Receiver failed, the memories that she had received were released. They didn't come back to me. They went . . ."

He paused, and seemed to be struggling with the concept. "I don't know, exactly. They went to the place where memories once existed before Receivers were created. Someplace out *there*—" He gestured vaguely with

his arm. “And then the people had access to them. Apparently that’s the way it was, once. Everyone had access to memories.

“It was chaos,” he said. “They really suffered for a while. Finally it subsided as the memories were assimilated. But it certainly made them aware of how they need a Receiver to contain all that pain. And knowledge.”

“But you have to suffer like that all the time,” Jonas pointed out.

The Giver nodded. “And you will. It’s my life. It will be yours.”

Jonas thought about it, about what it would be like for him. “Along with walking and eating and—” He looked around the walls of books. “Reading? That’s it?”

The Giver shook his head. “Those are simply the things that I *do*. My *life* is here.”

“In this room?”

The Giver shook his head. He put his hands to his own face, to his chest. “No. Here, in my being. Where the memories are.”

“My Instructors in science and technology have taught us about how the brain works,” Jonas told him eagerly. “It’s full of electrical impulses. It’s like a computer. If you stimulate one part of the brain with an electrode, it —” He stopped talking. He could see an odd look on The Giver’s face.

“They know nothing,” The Giver said bitterly.

Jonas was shocked. Since the first day in the Annex room, they had together disregarded the rules about rudeness, and Jonas felt comfortable with that now. But this was different, and far beyond rude. This was a terrible accusation. What if someone had heard?

He glanced quickly at the wall speaker, terrified that the Committee might be listening as they could at any time. But, as always during their sessions together, the switch had been turned to OFF.

“Nothing?” Jonas whispered nervously. “But my instructors—”

The Giver flicked his hand as if brushing something aside. “Oh, your instructors are well trained. They know their scientific facts. *Everyone* is well trained for his job.

“It’s just that . . . without the memories it’s all meaningless. They gave that burden to me. And to the previous Receiver. And the one before him.”

“And back and back and back,” Jonas said, knowing the phrase that always came.

The Giver smiled, though his smile was oddly harsh. “That’s right. And next it will be you. A great honor.”

“Yes, sir. They told me that at the Ceremony. The very highest honor.”

Some afternoons The Giver sent him away without training. Jonas knew, on days when he arrived to find The Giver hunched over, rocking his body slightly back and forth, his face pale, that he would be sent away.

“Go,” The Giver would tell him tensely. “I’m in pain today. Come back tomorrow.”

On those days, worried and disappointed, Jonas would walk alone beside the river. The paths were empty of people except for the few Delivery Crews and Landscape Workers here and there. Small children were all at the Childcare Center after school, and the older ones busy with volunteer hours or training.

By himself, he tested his own developing memory. He watched the landscape for glimpses of the green that he knew was embedded in the shrubbery; when it came flickering into his consciousness, he focused upon it, keeping it there, darkening it, holding it in his vision as long as possible until his head hurt and he let it fade away.

He stared at the flat, colorless sky, bringing blue from it, and remembered sunshine until finally, for an instant, he could feel warmth.

He stood at the foot of the bridge that spanned the river, the bridge that citizens were allowed to cross only on official business. Jonas had crossed it on school trips, visiting the outlying communities, and he knew that the land beyond the bridge was much the same, flat and well ordered, with fields for agriculture. The other communities he had seen on visits were essentially the same as his own, the only differences were slightly altered styles of dwellings, slightly different schedules in the schools.

He wondered what lay in the far distance where he had never gone. The land didn’t *end* beyond those nearby communities. Were there *hills* Elsewhere? Were there vast wind-torn areas like the place he had seen in memory, the place where the elephant died?

“Giver,” he asked one afternoon following a day when he had been sent away, “what causes you pain?”

When The Giver was silent, Jonas continued. “The Chief Elder told me, at the beginning, that the receiving of memory causes terrible pain. And

you described for me that the failure of the last new Receiver released painful memories to the community.

"But I haven't suffered, Giver. Not really." Jonas smiled. "Oh, I remember the sunburn you gave me on the very first day. But that wasn't so terrible. What is it that makes you suffer so much? If you gave some of it to me, maybe your pain would be less."

The Giver nodded. "Lie down," he said. "It's time, I suppose. I can't shield you forever. You'll have to take it all on eventually.

"Let me think," he went on, when Jonas was on the bed, waiting, a little fearful.

"All right," The Giver said after a moment, "I've decided. We'll start with something familiar. Let's go once again to a hill, and a sled."

He placed his hands on Jonas's back.

Fourteen

IT WAS MUCH the same, this memory, though the hill seemed to be a different one, steeper, and the snow was not falling as thickly as it had before.

It was colder, also, Jonas perceived. He could see, as he sat waiting at the top of the hill, that the snow beneath the sled was not thick and soft as it had been before, but hard, and coated with bluish ice.

The sled moved forward, and Jonas grinned with delight, looking forward to the breathtaking slide down through the invigorating air.

But the runners, this time, couldn't slice through the frozen expanse as they had on the other, snow-cushioned hill. They skittered sideways and the sled gathered speed. Jonas pulled at the rope, trying to steer, but the steepness and speed took control from his hands and he was no longer enjoying the feeling of freedom but instead, terrified, was at the mercy of the wild acceleration downward over the ice.

Sideways, spinning, the sled hit a bump in the hill and Jonas was jarred loose and thrown violently into the air. He fell with his leg twisted under him, and could hear the crack of bone. His face scraped along jagged edges of ice and when he came, at last, to a stop, he lay shocked and still, feeling nothing at first but fear.

Then, the first wave of pain. He gasped. It was as if a hatchet lay lodged in his leg, slicing through each nerve with a hot blade. In his agony he perceived the word "fire" and felt flames licking at the torn bone and flesh. He tried to move, and could not. The pain grew.

He screamed. There was no answer.

Sobbing, he turned his head and vomited onto the frozen snow. Blood dripped from his face into the vomit.

"Nooooo!" he cried, and the sound disappeared into the empty landscape, into the wind.

Then, suddenly, he was in the Annex room again, writhing on the bed. His face was wet with tears.

Able to move now, he rocked his own body back and forth, breathing deeply to release the remembered pain.

He sat, and looked at his own leg, where it lay straight on the bed, unbroken. The brutal slice of pain was gone. But the leg ached horribly, still, and his face felt raw.

"May I have relief-of-pain, please?" he begged. It was always provided in his everyday life for the bruises and wounds, for a mashed finger, a stomach ache, a skinned knee from a fall from a bike. There was always a daub of anesthetic ointment, or a pill; or in severe instances, an injection that brought complete and instantaneous deliverance.

But The Giver said no, and looked away.

Limping, Jonas walked home, pushing his bicycle, that evening. The sunburn pain had been so small, in comparison, and had not stayed with him. But this ache lingered.

It was not unendurable, as the pain on the hill had been. Jonas tried to be brave. He remembered that the Chief Elder had said he was brave.

"Is something wrong, Jonas?" his father asked at the evening meal. "You're so quiet tonight. Aren't you feeling well? Would you like some medication?"

But Jonas remembered the rules. No medication for anything related to his training.

And no discussion of his training. At the time for sharing-of-feelings, he simply said that he felt tired, that his school lessons had been unusually demanding that day.

He went to his sleepingroom early, and from behind the closed door he could hear his parents and sister laughing as they gave Gabriel his evening bath.

They have never known pain, he thought. The realization made him feel desperately lonely, and he rubbed his throbbing leg. He eventually slept. Again and again he dreamed of the anguish and the isolation on the forsaken hill.

The daily training continued, and now it always included pain. The agony of the fractured leg began to seem no more than a mild discomfort as The Giver led Jonas firmly, little by little, into the deep and terrible suffering of the past. Each time, in his kindness, The Giver ended the afternoon with a color-filled memory of pleasure: a brisk sail on a blue-green lake; a meadow dotted with yellow wildflowers; an orange sunset behind mountains.

It was not enough to assuage the pain that Jonas was beginning, now, to know.

"*Why?*" Jonas asked him after he had received a torturous memory in which he had been neglected and unfed; the hunger had caused excruciating spasms in his empty, distended stomach. He lay on the bed, aching. "Why do you and I have to hold these memories?"

"It gives us wisdom," The Giver replied. "Without wisdom I could not fulfill my function of advising the Committee of Elders when they call upon me."

"But what wisdom do you get from hunger?" Jonas groaned. His stomach still hurt, though the memory had ended.

"Some years ago," The Giver told him, "before your birth, a lot of citizens petitioned the Committee of Elders. They wanted to increase the rate of births. They wanted each Birthmother to be assigned four births instead of three, so that the population would increase and there would be more Laborers available."

Jonas nodded, listening. "That makes sense."

"The idea was that certain family units could accommodate an additional child."

Jonas nodded again. "Mine could," he pointed out. "We have Gabriel this year, and it's fun, having a third child."

"The Committee of Elders sought my advice," The Giver said. "It made sense to them, too, but it was a new idea, and they came to me for wisdom."

"And you used your memories?"

The Giver said yes. "And the strongest memory that came was hunger. It came from many generations back. *Centuries* back. The population had gotten so big that hunger was everywhere. Excruciating hunger and starvation. It was followed by warfare."

Warfare? It was a concept Jonas did not know. But hunger was familiar to him now. Unconsciously he rubbed his own abdomen, recalling the pain of its unfulfilled needs. "So you described that to them?"

"They don't want to hear about pain. They just seek the advice. I simply advised them against increasing the population."

"But you said that that was before my birth. They hardly ever come to you for advice. Only when they—what was it you said? When they have a problem they've never faced before. When did it happen last?"

“Do you remember the day when the plane flew over the community?”

“Yes. I was scared.”

“So were they. They prepared to shoot it down. But they sought my advice. I told them to wait.”

“But how did you know? How did you know the pilot was lost?”

“I didn’t. I used my wisdom, from the memories. I knew that there had been times in the past—terrible times—when people had destroyed others in haste, in fear, and had brought about their own destruction.”

Jonas realized something. “That means,” he said slowly, “that you have memories of destruction. And you have to give them to me, too, because I have to get the wisdom.”

The Giver nodded.

“But it will hurt,” Jonas said. It wasn’t a question.

“It will hurt terribly,” The Giver agreed.

“But why can’t *everyone* have the memories? I think it would seem a little easier if the memories were shared. You and I wouldn’t have to bear so much by ourselves, if everybody took a part.”

The Giver sighed. “You’re right,” he said. “But then everyone would be burdened and pained. They don’t want that. And that’s the real reason The Receiver is so vital to them, and so honored. They selected me—and you—to lift that burden from themselves.”

“When did they decide that?” Jonas asked angrily. “It wasn’t fair. Let’s change it!”

“How do you suggest we do that? I’ve never been able to think of a way, and I’m supposed to be the one with all the wisdom.”

“But there are two of us now,” Jonas said eagerly. “*Together* we can think of something!”

The Giver watched him with a wry smile.

“Why can’t we just apply for a change of rules?” Jonas suggested.

The Giver laughed; then Jonas, too, chuckled reluctantly.

“The decision was made long before my time or yours,” The Giver said, “and before the previous Receiver, and—” He waited.

“Back and back and back.” Jonas repeated the familiar phrase. Sometimes it had seemed humorous to him. Sometimes it had seemed meaningful and important.

Now it was ominous. It meant, he knew, that nothing could be changed.

The newchild, Gabriel, was growing, and successfully passed the tests of maturity that the Nurturers gave each month; he could sit alone, now, could reach for and grasp small play objects, and he had six teeth. During the daytime hours, Father reported, he was cheerful and seemed of normal intelligence. But he remained fretful at night, whimpering often, needing frequent attention.

"After all this extra time I've put in with him," Father said one evening after Gabriel had been bathed and was lying, for the moment, hugging his hippo placidly in the small crib that had replaced the basket, "I hope they're not going to decide to release him."

"Maybe it would be for the best," Mother suggested. "I know you don't mind getting up with him at night. But the lack of sleep is awfully hard for me."

"If they release Gabriel, can we get another newchild as a visitor?" asked Lily. She was kneeling beside the crib, making funny faces at the little one, who was smiling back at her.

Jonas's mother rolled her eyes in dismay.

"No," Father said, smiling. He ruffled Lily's hair. "It's very rare, anyway, that a newchild's status is as uncertain as Gabriel's. It probably won't happen again, for a long time.

"Anyway," he sighed, "they won't make the decision for a while. Right now we're all preparing for a release we'll probably have to make very soon. There's a Birth-mother who's expecting twin males next month."

"Oh, dear," Mother said, shaking her head. "If they're identical, I hope you're not the one assigned—"

"I am. I'm next on the list. I'll have to select the one to be nurtured, and the one to be released. It's usually not hard, though. Usually it's just a matter of birthweight. We release the smaller of the two."

Jonas, listening, thought suddenly about the bridge and how, standing there, he had wondered what lay Elsewhere. Was there someone there, waiting, who would receive the tiny released twin? Would it grow up Elsewhere, not knowing, ever, that in this community lived a being who looked exactly the same?

For a moment he felt a tiny, fluttering hope that he knew was quite foolish. He hoped that it would be Larissa, waiting. Larissa, the old woman he had bathed. He remembered her sparkling eyes, her soft voice, her low

chuckle. Fiona had told him recently that Larissa had been released at a wonderful ceremony.

But he knew that the Old were not given children to raise. Larissa's life Elsewhere would be quiet and serene as befit the Old; she would not welcome the responsibility of nurturing a newchild who needed feeding and care, and would likely cry at night.

"Mother? Father?" he said, the idea coming to him unexpectedly, "why don't we put Gabriel's crib in my room tonight? I know how to feed and comfort him, and it would let you and Father get some sleep."

Father looked doubtful. "You sleep so soundly, Jonas. What if his restlessness didn't wake you?"

It was Lily who answered that. "If no one goes to tend Gabriel," she pointed out, "he gets very loud. He'd wake *all* of us, if Jonas slept through it."

Father laughed. "You're right, Lily-billy. All right, Jonas, let's try it, just for tonight. I'll take the night off and we'll let Mother get some sleep, too."

Gabriel slept soundly for the earliest part of the night. Jonas, in his bed, lay awake for a while; from time to time he raised himself on one elbow, looking over at the crib. The newchild was on his stomach, his arms relaxed beside his head, his eyes closed, and his breathing regular and undisturbed. Finally Jonas slept too.

Then, as the middle hours of the night approached, the noise of Gabe's restlessness woke Jonas. The newchild was turning under his cover, flailing his arms, and beginning to whimper.

Jonas rose and went to him. Gently he patted Gabriel's back. Sometimes that was all it took to lull him back to sleep. But the newchild still squirmed fretfully under his hand.

Still patting rhythmically, Jonas began to remember the wonderful sail that The Giver had given him not long before: a bright, breezy day on a clear turquoise lake, and above him the white sail of the boat billowing as he moved along in the brisk wind.

He was not aware of giving the memory; but suddenly he realized that it was becoming dimmer, that it was sliding through his hand into the being of the newchild. Gabriel became quiet. Startled, Jonas pulled back what

was left of the memory with a burst of will. He removed his hand from the little back and stood quietly beside the crib.

To himself, he called the memory of the sail forward again. It was still there, but the sky was less blue, the gentle motion of the boat slower, the water of the lake more murky and clouded. He kept it for a while, soothing his own nervousness at what had occurred, then let it go and returned to his bed.

Once more, toward dawn, the newchild woke and cried out. Again Jonas went to him. This time he quite deliberately placed his hand firmly on Gabriel's back, and released the rest of the calming day on the lake. Again Gabriel slept.

But now Jonas lay awake, thinking. He no longer had any more than a wisp of the memory, and he felt a small lack where it had been. He could ask The Giver for another sail, he knew. A sail perhaps on ocean, next time, for Jonas had a memory of ocean, now, and knew what it was; he knew that there were sailboats there, too, in memories yet to be acquired.

He wondered, though, if he should confess to The Giver that he had given a memory away. He was not yet qualified to be a Giver himself; nor had Gabriel been selected to be a Receiver.

That he had this power frightened him. He decided not to tell.

Fifteen

JONAS ENTERED THE Annex room and realized immediately that it was a day when he would be sent away. The Giver was rigid in his chair, his face in his hands.

"I'll come back tomorrow, sir," he said quickly. Then he hesitated. "Unless maybe there's something I can do to help."

The Giver looked up at him, his face contorted with suffering. "Please," he gasped, "take some of the pain."

Jonas helped him to his chair at the side of the bed. Then he quickly removed his tunic and lay face down. "Put your hands on me," he directed, aware that in such anguish The Giver might need reminding.

The hands came, and the pain came with them and through them. Jonas braced himself and entered the memory which was torturing The Giver.

He was in a confused, noisy, foul-smelling place. It was daylight, early morning, and the air was thick with smoke that hung, yellow and brown, above the ground. Around him, everywhere, far across the expanse of what seemed to be a field, lay groaning men. A wild-eyed horse, its bridle torn and dangling, trotted frantically through the mounds of men, tossing its head, whinnying in panic. It stumbled, finally, then fell, and did not rise.

Jonas heard a voice next to him. "Water," the voice said in a parched, croaking whisper.

He turned his head toward the voice and looked into the half-closed eyes of a boy who seemed not much older than himself. Dirt streaked the boy's face and his matted blond hair. He lay sprawled, his gray uniform glistening with wet, fresh blood.

The colors of the carnage were grotesquely bright: the crimson wetness on the rough and dusty fabric, the ripped shreds of grass, startlingly green, in the boy's yellow hair.

The boy stared at him. "Water," he begged again. When he spoke, a new spurt of blood drenched the coarse cloth across his chest and sleeve.

One of Jonas's arms was immobilized with pain, and he could see through his own torn sleeve something that looked like ragged flesh and splintery bone. He tried his remaining arm and felt it move. Slowly he reached to his side, felt the metal container there, and removed its cap,

stopping the small motion of his hand now and then to wait for the surging pain to ease. Finally, when the container was open, he extended his arm slowly across the blood-soaked earth, inch by inch, and held it to the lips of the boy. Water trickled into the imploring mouth and down the grimy chin.

The boy sighed. His head fell back, his lower jaw dropping as if he had been surprised by something. A dull blankness slid slowly across his eyes. He was silent.

But the noise continued all around: the cries of the wounded men, the cries begging for water and for Mother and for death. Horses lying on the ground shrieked, raised their heads, and stabbed randomly toward the sky with their hooves.

From the distance, Jonas could hear the thud of cannons. Overwhelmed by pain, he lay there in the fearsome stench for hours, listened to the men and animals die, and learned what warfare meant.

Finally, when he knew that he could bear it no longer and would welcome death himself, he opened his eyes and was once again on the bed.

The Giver looked away, as if he could not bear to see what he had done to Jonas. “Forgive me,” he said.

Sixteen

JONAS DID NOT want to go back. He didn't want the memories, didn't want the honor, didn't want the wisdom, didn't want the pain. He wanted his childhood again, his scraped knees and ball games. He sat in his dwelling alone, watching through the window, seeing children at play, citizens bicycling home from uneventful days at work, ordinary lives free of anguish because he had been selected, as others before him had, to bear their burden.

But the choice was not his. He returned each day to the Annex room.

The Giver was gentle with him for many days following the terrible shared memory of war.

"There are so many good memories," The Giver reminded Jonas. And it was true. By now Jonas had experienced countless bits of happiness, things he had never known of before.

He had seen a birthday party, with one child singled out and celebrated on his day, so that now he understood the joy of being an individual, special and unique and proud.

He had visited museums and seen paintings filled with all the colors he could now recognize and name.

In one ecstatic memory he had ridden a gleaming brown horse across a field that smelled of damp grass, and had dismounted beside a small stream from which both he and the horse drank cold, clear water. Now he understood about animals; and in the moment that the horse turned from the stream and nudged Jonas's shoulder affectionately with its head, he perceived the bonds between animal and human.

He had walked through woods, and sat at night beside a campfire. Although he had through the memories learned about the pain of loss and loneliness, now he gained, too, an understanding of solitude and its joy.

"What is your favorite?" Jonas asked The Giver. "You don't have to give it away yet," he added quickly. "Just tell me about it, so I can look forward to it, because I'll have to receive it when your job is done."

The Giver smiled. "Lie down," he said. "I'm happy to give it to you."

Jonas felt the joy of it as soon as the memory began. Sometimes it took a while for him to get his bearings, to find his place. But this time he fit

right in and felt the happiness that pervaded the memory.

He was in a room filled with people, and it was warm, with firelight glowing on a hearth. He could see through a window that outside it was night, and snowing. There were colored lights: red and green and yellow, twinkling from a tree which was, oddly, inside the room. On a table, lighted candles stood in a polished golden holder and cast a soft, flickering glow. He could smell things cooking, and he heard soft laughter. A golden-haired dog lay sleeping on the floor.

On the floor there were packages wrapped in brightly colored paper and tied with gleaming ribbons. As Jonas watched, a small child began to pick up the packages and pass them around the room: to other children, to adults who were obviously parents, and to an older, quiet couple, man and woman, who sat smiling together on a couch.

While Jonas watched, the people began one by one to untie the ribbons on the packages, to unwrap the bright papers, open the boxes and reveal toys and clothing and books. There were cries of delight. They hugged one another.

The small child went and sat on the lap of the old woman, and she rocked him and rubbed her cheek against his.

Jonas opened his eyes and lay contentedly on the bed, still luxuriating in the warm and comforting memory. It had all been there, all the things he had learned to treasure.

"What did you perceive?" The Giver asked.

"Warmth," Jonas replied, "and happiness. And—let me think. *Family*. That it was a celebration of some sort, a holiday. And something else—I can't quite get the word for it."

"It will come to you."

"Who were the old people? Why were they there?" It had puzzled Jonas, seeing them in the room. The Old of the community did not ever leave their special place, the House of the Old, where they were so well cared for and respected.

"They were called Grandparents."

"Grand parents?"

"Grandparents. It meant parents-of-the-parents, long ago."

"Back and back and back?" Jonas began to laugh. "So actually, there could be parents-of-the-parents-of-the-parents-of-the parents?"

The Giver laughed, too. “That’s right. It’s a little like looking at yourself looking in a mirror looking at yourself looking in a mirror.”

Jonas frowned. “But my parents must have had parents! I never thought about it before. Who are my parents-of-the-parents? *Where* are they?”

“You could go look in the Hall of Open Records. You’d find the names. But think, son. If you apply for children, then who will be their parents-of-the-parents? Who will be their grandparents?”

“My mother and father, of course.”

“And where will they be?”

Jonas thought. “Oh,” he said slowly. “When I finish my training and become a full adult, I’ll be given my own dwelling. And then when Lily does, a few years later, she’ll get *her* own dwelling, and maybe a spouse, and children if she applies for them, and then Mother and Father—”

“That’s right.”

“As long as they’re still working and contributing to the community, they’ll go and live with the other Childless Adults. And they won’t be part of my life anymore.

“And after that, when the time comes, they’ll go to the House of the Old,” Jonas went on. He was thinking aloud. “And they’ll be well cared for, and respected, and when they’re released, there will be a celebration.”

“Which you won’t attend,” The Giver pointed out.

“No, of course not, because I won’t even know about it. By then I’ll be so busy with my own life. And Lily will, too. So our children, if we have them, won’t know who their parents-of-parents are, either.

“It seems to work pretty well that way, doesn’t it? The way we do it in our community?” Jonas asked. “I just didn’t realize there was any other way, until I received that memory.”

“It works,” The Giver agreed.

Jonas hesitated. “I certainly liked the memory, though. I can see why it’s your favorite. I couldn’t quite get the word for the whole feeling of it, the feeling that was so strong in the room.”

“Love,” The Giver told him.

Jonas repeated it. “Love.” It was a word and concept new to him.

They were both silent for a minute. Then Jonas said, “Giver?”

“Yes?”

“I feel very foolish saying this. Very, very foolish.”

“No need. Nothing is foolish here. Trust the memories and how they make you feel.”

“Well,” Jonas said, looking at the floor, “I know you don’t have the memory anymore, because you gave it to me, so maybe you won’t understand this—”

“I will. I am left with a vague wisp of that one; and I have many other memories of families, and holidays, and happiness. Of love.”

Jonas blurted out what he was feeling. “I was thinking that . . . well, I can see that it wasn’t a very practical way to live, with the Old right there in the same place, where maybe they wouldn’t be well taken care of, the way they are now, and that we have a better-arranged way of doing things. But anyway, I was thinking, I mean feeling, actually, that it was kind of nice, then. And that I wish we could be that way, and that you could be my grandparent. The family in the memory seemed a little more—” He faltered, not able to find the word he wanted.

“A little more complete,” The Giver suggested.

Jonas nodded. “I liked the feeling of love,” he confessed. He glanced nervously at the speaker on the wall, reassuring himself that no one was listening. “I wish we still had that,” he whispered. “Of course,” he added quickly, “I do understand that it wouldn’t work very well. And that it’s much better to be organized the way we are now. I can see that it was a *dangerous* way to live.”

“What do you mean?”

Jonas hesitated. He wasn’t certain, really, what he had meant. He could feel that there was *risk* involved, though he wasn’t sure how. “Well,” he said finally, grasping for an explanation, “they had *fire* right there in that room. There was a fire burning in the fireplace. And there were candles on a table. I can certainly see why those things were outlawed.

“Still,” he said slowly, almost to himself, “I did like the light they made. And the warmth.”

“Father? Mother?” Jonas asked tentatively after the evening meal. “I have a question I want to ask you.”

“What is it, Jonas?” his father asked.

He made himself say the words, though he felt flushed with embarrassment. He had rehearsed them in his mind all the way home from the Annex.

“Do you love me?”

There was an awkward silence for a moment. Then Father gave a little chuckle. “*Jonas*. You, of all people. Precision of language, *please!*”

“What do you mean?” Jonas asked. Amusement was not at all what he had anticipated.

“Your father means that you used a very generalized word, so meaningless that it’s become almost obsolete,” his mother explained carefully.

Jonas stared at them. Meaningless? He had never before felt anything as meaningful as the memory.

“And of course our community can’t function smoothly if people don’t use precise language. You could ask, ‘Do you enjoy me?’ The answer is ‘Yes,’” his mother said.

“Or,” his father suggested, “‘Do you take pride in my accomplishments?’ And the answer is wholeheartedly ‘Yes.’”

“Do you understand why it’s inappropriate to use a word like ‘love’?” Mother asked.

Jonas nodded. “Yes, thank you, I do,” he replied slowly.

It was his first lie to his parents.

“Gabriel?” Jonas whispered that night to the newchild. The crib was in his room again. After Gabe had slept soundly in Jonas’s room for four nights, his parents had pronounced the experiment a success and Jonas a hero. Gabriel was growing rapidly, now crawling and giggling across the room and pulling himself up to stand. He could be upgraded in the Nurturing Center, Father said happily, now that he slept; he could be officially named and given to his family in December, which was only two months away.

But when he was taken away, he stopped sleeping again, and cried in the night.

So he was back in Jonas’s sleepingroom. They would give it a little more time, they decided. Since Gabe seemed to like it in Jonas’s room, he would sleep there at night a little longer, until the habit of sound sleep was fully formed. The Nurturers were very optimistic about Gabriel’s future.

There was no answer to Jonas’s whisper. Gabriel was sound asleep.

“Things could change, Gabe,” Jonas went on. “Things could be different. I don’t know how, but there must be some way for things to be different. There could be colors.

“And grandparents,” he added, staring through the dimness toward the ceiling of his sleepingroom. “And everybody would have the memories.

“You know about memories,” he whispered, turning toward the crib.

Gabriel’s breathing was even and deep. Jonas liked having him there, though he felt guilty about the secret. Each night he gave memories to Gabriel: memories of boat rides and picnics in the sun; memories of soft rainfall against windowpanes; memories of dancing barefoot on a damp lawn.

“Gabe?”

The newchild stirred slightly in his sleep. Jonas looked over at him.

“There could be love,” Jonas whispered.

The next morning, for the first time, Jonas did not take his pill. Something within him, something that had grown there through the memories, told him to throw the pill away.

Seventeen

TODAY IS DECLARED AN UNSCHEDULED HOLIDAY. Jonas, his parents, and Lily all turned in surprise and looked at the wall speaker from which the announcement had come. It happened so rarely, and was such a treat for the entire community when it did. Adults were exempted from the day's work, children from school and training and volunteer hours. The substitute Laborers, who would be given a different holiday, took over all the necessary tasks: nurturing, food delivery, and care of the Old; and the community was free.

Jonas cheered, and put his homework folder down. He had been about to leave for school. School was less important to him now; and before much more time passed, his formal schooling would end. But still, for Twelves, though they had begun their adult training, there were the endless lists of rules to be memorized and the newest technology to be mastered.

He wished his parents, sister, and Gabe a happy day, and rode down the bicycle path, looking for Asher.

He had not taken the pills, now, for four weeks. The Stirrings had returned, and he felt a little guilty and embarrassed about the pleasurable dreams that came to him as he slept. But he knew he couldn't go back to the world of no feelings that he had lived in so long.

And his new, heightened feelings permeated a greater realm than simply his sleep. Though he knew that his failure to take the pills accounted for some of it, he thought that the feelings came also from the memories. Now he could see all of the colors; and he could *keep* them, too, so that the trees and grass and bushes stayed green in his vision. Gabriel's rosy cheeks stayed pink, even when he slept. And apples were always, always red.

Now, through the memories, he had seen oceans and mountain lakes and streams that gurgled through woods; and now he saw the familiar wide river beside the path differently. He saw all of the light and color and history it contained and carried in its slow-moving water; and he knew that there was an Elsewhere from which it came, and an Elsewhere to which it was going.

On this unexpected, casual holiday he felt happy, as he always had on holidays; but with a deeper happiness than ever before. Thinking, as he

always did, about precision of language, Jonas realized that it was a new *depth* of feelings that he was experiencing. Somehow they were not at all the same as the feelings that every evening, in every dwelling, every citizen analyzed with endless talk.

"I felt angry because someone broke the play area rules," Lily had said once, making a fist with her small hand to indicate her fury. Her family—Jonas among them—had talked about the possible reasons for rule-breaking, and the need for understanding and patience, until Lily's fist had relaxed and her anger was gone.

But Lily had not felt anger, Jonas realized now. Shallow impatience and exasperation, that was all Lily had felt. He knew that with certainty because now he knew what anger was. Now he had, in the memories, experienced injustice and cruelty, and he had reacted with rage that welled up so passionately inside him that the thought of discussing it calmly at the evening meal was unthinkable.

"I felt sad today," he had heard his mother say, and they had comforted her.

But now Jonas had experienced real sadness. He had felt grief. He knew that there was no quick comfort for emotions like those.

These were deeper and they did not need to be told. They were *felt*.

Today, he felt happiness.

"Asher!" He spied his friend's bicycle leaning against a tree at the edge of the playing field. Nearby, other bikes were strewn about on the ground. On a holiday the usual rules of order could be disregarded.

He skidded to a stop and dropped his own bike beside the others. "Hey, Ash!" he shouted, looking around. There seemed to be no one in the play area. "Where are you?"

"Psssheeewwww!" A child's voice, coming from behind a nearby bush, made the sound. "Pow! Pow! Pow!"

A female Eleven named Tanya staggered forward from where she had been hiding. Dramatically she clutched her stomach and stumbled about in a zig-zag pattern, groaning. "You got me!" she called, and fell to the ground, grinning.

"Blam!"

Jonas, standing on the side of the playing field, recognized Asher's voice. He saw his friend, aiming an imaginary weapon in his hand, dart

from behind one tree to another. “Blam! You’re in my line of ambush, Jonas! Watch out!”

Jonas stepped back. He moved behind Asher’s bike and knelt so that he was out of sight. It was a game he had often played with the other children, a game of good guys and bad guys, a harmless pasttime that used up their contained energy and ended only when they all lay posed in freakish postures on the ground.

He had never recognized it before as a game of war.

“Attack!” The shout came from behind the small storehouse where play equipment was kept. Three children dashed forward, their imaginary weapons in firing position.

From the opposite side of the field came an opposing shout: “Counter-attack!” From their hiding places a horde of children—Jonas recognized Fiona in the group—emerged, running in a crouched position, firing across the field. Several of them stopped, grabbed their own shoulders and chests with exaggerated gestures, and pretended to be hit. They dropped to the ground and lay suppressing giggles.

Feelings surged within Jonas. He found himself walking forward into the field.

“You’re hit, Jonas!” Asher yelled from behind the tree. “Pow! You’re hit again!”

Jonas stood alone in the center of the field. Several of the children raised their heads and looked at him uneasily. The attacking armies slowed, emerged from their crouched positions, and watched to see what he was doing.

In his mind, Jonas saw again the face of the boy who had lain dying on a field and had begged him for water. He had a sudden choking feeling, as if it were difficult to breathe.

One of the children raised an imaginary rifle and made an attempt to destroy him with a firing noise. “Pssheeew!” Then they were all silent, standing awkwardly, and the only sound was the sound of Jonas’s shuddering breaths. He was struggling not to cry.

Gradually, when nothing happened, nothing changed, the children looked at each other nervously and went away. He heard the sounds as they righted their bicycles and began to ride down the path that led from the field.

Only Asher and Fiona remained.

“What’s wrong, Jonas? It was only a game,” Fiona said.

“You ruined it,” Asher said in an irritated voice.

“Don’t play it anymore,” Jonas pleaded.

“I’m the one who’s training for Assistant Recreation Director,” Asher pointed out angrily. “Games aren’t *your* area of expertness.”

“Expertise,” Jonas corrected him automatically.

“Whatever. You can’t say what we play, even if you *are* going to be the new Receiver.” Asher looked warily at him. “I apologize for not paying you the respect you deserve,” he mumbled.

“Asher,” Jonas said. He was trying to speak carefully, and with kindness, to say exactly what he wanted to say. “You had no way of knowing this. I didn’t know it myself until recently. But it’s a cruel game. In the past, there have—”

“I said I *apologize,* Jonas.”

Jonas sighed. It was no use. Of course Asher couldn’t understand. “I accept your apology, Asher,” he said wearily.

“Do you want to go for a ride along the river, Jonas?” Fiona asked, biting her lip with nervousness.

Jonas looked at her. She was so lovely. For a fleeting instant he thought he would like nothing better than to ride peacefully along the river path, laughing and talking with his gentle female friend. But he knew that such times had been taken from him now. He shook his head. After a moment his two friends turned and went to their bikes. He watched as they rode away.

Jonas trudged to the bench beside the Storehouse and sat down, overwhelmed with feelings of loss. His childhood, his friendships, his carefree sense of security—all of these things seemed to be slipping away. With his new, heightened feelings, he was overwhelmed by sadness at the way the others had laughed and shouted, playing at war. But he knew that they could not understand why, without the memories. He felt such love for Asher and for Fiona. But they could not feel it back, without the memories. And he could not give them those. Jonas knew with certainty that he could change nothing.

Back in their dwelling, that evening, Lily chattered merrily about the wonderful holiday she had had, playing with her friends, having her

midday meal out of doors, and (she confessed) sneaking a very short try on her father's bicycle.

"I can't wait till I get my very own bicycle next month. Father's is too big for me. I fell," she explained matter-of-factly. "Good thing Gabe wasn't in the child seat!"

"A very good thing," Mother agreed, frowning at the idea of it. Gabriel waved his arms at the mention of himself. He had begun to walk just the week before. The first steps of a newchild were always the occasion for celebration at the Nurturing Center, Father said, but also for the introduction of a discipline wand. Now Father brought the slender instrument home with him each night, in case Gabriel misbehaved.

But he was a happy and easygoing toddler. Now he moved unsteadily across the room, laughing. "Gay!" he chirped. "Gay!" It was the way he said his own name.

Jonas brightened. It had been a depressing day for him, after such a bright start. But he set his glum thoughts aside. He thought about starting to teach Lily to ride so that she could speed off proudly after her Ceremony of Nine, which would be coming soon. It was hard to believe that it was almost December again, that almost a year had passed since he had become a Twelve.

He smiled as he watched the newchild plant one small foot carefully before the other, grinning with glee at his own steps as he tried them out.

"I want to get to sleep early tonight," Father said. "Tomorrow's a busy day for me. The twins are being born tomorrow, and the test results show that they're identical."

"One for here, one for Elsewhere," Lily chanted. "One for here, one for Else—"

"Do you actually *take* it Elsewhere, Father?" Jonas asked.

"No, I just have to make the selection. I weigh them, hand the larger over to a Nurturer who's standing by, waiting, and then I get the smaller one all cleaned up and comfy. Then I perform a small Ceremony of Release and—" He glanced down, grinning at Gabriel. "Then I wave bye-bye," he said, in the special sweet voice he used when he spoke to the newchild. He waved his hand in the familiar gesture.

Gabriel giggled and waved bye-bye back to him.

"And somebody else comes to get him? Somebody from Elsewhere?"

"That's right, Jonas-bonus."

Jonas rolled his eyes in embarrassment that his father had used the silly pet name.

Lily was deep in thought. “What if they give the little twin a name Elsewhere, a name like, oh, maybe Jonathan? And here, in our community, at his naming, the twin that we kept here is given the name Jonathan, and then there would be two children with the same name, and they would *look* exactly the same, and someday, maybe when they were a Six, one group of Sixes would go to visit another community on a bus, and there in the other community, in the *other* group of Sixes, would be a Jonathan who was exactly the same as the *other* Jonathan, and then maybe they would get mixed up and take the wrong Jonathan home, and maybe his parents wouldn’t notice, and then—”

She paused for breath.

“Lily,” Mother said, “I have a wonderful idea. Maybe when you become a Twelve, they’ll give you the Assignment of Storyteller! I don’t think we’ve had a Storyteller in the community for a long time. But if I were on the Committee, I would definitely choose you for that job!”

Lily grinned. “I have a *better* idea for one more story,” she announced. “What if actually we were *all* twins and didn’t know it, and so Elsewhere there would be another Lily, and another Jonas, and another Father, and another Asher, and another Chief Elder, and another—”

Father groaned. “Lily,” he said. “It’s bedtime.”

Eighteen

"GIVER," JONAS ASKED the next afternoon, "Do you ever think about release?"

"Do you mean my own release, or just the general topic of release?"

"Both, I guess. I apologi—I mean I should have been more precise. But I don't know exactly what I meant."

"Sit back up. No need to lie down while we're talking." Jonas, who had already been stretched out on the bed when the question came to his mind, sat back up.

"I guess I do think about it occasionally," The Giver said. "I think about my own release when I'm in an awful lot of pain. I wish I could put in a request for it, sometimes. But I'm not permitted to do that until the new Receiver is trained."

"Me," Jonas said in a dejected voice. He was not looking forward to the end of the training, when he would become the new Receiver. It was clear to him what a terribly difficult and lonely life it was, despite the honor.

"I can't request release either," Jonas pointed out. "It was in my rules."

The Giver laughed harshly. "I know that. They hammered out those rules after the failure ten years ago."

Jonas had heard again and again now, reference to the previous failure. But he still did not know what had happened ten years before. "Giver," he said, "tell me what happened. Please."

The Giver shrugged. "On the surface, it was quite simple. A Receiver-to-be was selected, the way you were. The selection went smoothly enough. The Ceremony was held, and the selection was made. The crowd cheered, as they did for you. The new Receiver was puzzled and a little frightened, as you were."

"My parents told me it was a female."

The Giver nodded.

Jonas thought of his favorite female, Fiona, and shivered. He wouldn't want his gentle friend to suffer the way he had, taking on the memories. "What was she like?" he asked The Giver.

The Giver looked sad, thinking about it. "She was a remarkable young woman. Very self-possessed and serene. Intelligent, eager to learn." He

shook his head and drew a deep breath. “You know, Jonas, when she came to me in this room, when she presented herself to begin her training—”

Jonas interrupted him with a question. “Can you tell me her name? My parents said that it wasn’t to be spoken again in the community. But couldn’t you say it just to me?”

The Giver hesitated painfully, as if saying the name aloud might be excruciating. “Her name was Rosemary,” he told Jonas, finally.

“Rosemary. I like that name.”

The Giver went on. “When she came to me for the first time, she sat there in the chair where you sat on your first day. She was eager and excited and a little scared. We talked. I tried to explain things as well as I could.”

“The way you did to me.”

The Giver chuckled ruefully. “The explanations are difficult. The whole thing is so beyond one’s experience. But I tried. And she listened carefully. Her eyes were very luminous, I remember.”

He looked up suddenly. “Jonas, I gave you a memory that I told you was my favorite. I still have a shred of it left. The room, with the family, and grandparents?”

Jonas nodded. Of course he remembered. “Yes,” he said. “It had that wonderful feeling with it. You told me it was love.”

“You can understand, then, that that’s what I felt for Rosemary,” The Giver explained. “I loved her.

“I feel it for you, too,” he added.

“What happened to her?” Jonas asked.

“Her training began. She received well, as you do. She was so enthusiastic. So delighted to experience new things. I remember her laughter . . .”

His voice faltered and trailed off.

“What happened?” Jonas asked again, after a moment. “Please tell me.”

The Giver closed his eyes. “It broke my heart, Jonas, to transfer pain to her. But it was my job. It was what I had to do, the way I’ve had to do it to you.”

The room was silent. Jonas waited. Finally The Giver continued.

“Five weeks. That was all. I gave her happy memories: a ride on a merry-go-round; a kitten to play with; a picnic. Sometimes I chose one

just because I knew it would make her laugh, and I so treasured the sound of that laughter in this room that had always been so silent.

"But she was like you, Jonas. She wanted to experience everything. She knew that it was her responsibility. And so she asked me for more difficult memories."

Jonas held his breath for a moment. "You didn't give her *war,* did you? Not after just five weeks?"

The Giver shook his head and sighed. "No. And I didn't give her physical pain. But I gave her loneliness. And I gave her loss. I transferred a memory of a child taken from its parents. That was the first one. She appeared stunned at its end."

Jonas swallowed. Rosemary, and her laughter, had begun to seem real to him, and he pictured her looking up from the bed of memories, shocked.

The Giver continued. "I backed off, gave her more little delights. But everything changed, once she knew about pain. I could see it in her eyes."

"She wasn't brave enough?" Jonas suggested.

The Giver didn't respond to the question. "She insisted that I continue, that I not spare her. She said it was her duty. And I knew, of course, that she was correct.

"I couldn't bring myself to inflict physical pain on her. But I gave her anguish of many kinds. Poverty, and hunger, and terror.

"I *had* to, Jonas. It was my job. And she had been chosen." The Giver looked at him imploringly. Jonas stroked his hand.

"Finally one afternoon, we finished for the day. It had been a hard session. I tried to finish—as I do with you—by transferring something happy and cheerful. But the times of laughter were gone by then. She stood up very silently, frowning, as if she were making a decision. Then she came over to me and put her arms around me. She kissed my cheek." As Jonas watched, The Giver stroked his own cheek, recalling the touch of Rosemary's lips ten years before.

"She left here that day, left this room, and did not go back to her dwelling. I was notified by the Speaker that she had gone directly to the Chief Elder and asked to be released."

"But it's against the rules! The Receiver-in-training can't apply for rel—"

"It's in your rules, Jonas. But it wasn't in hers. She asked for release, and they had to give it to her. I never saw her again."

So that was the failure, Jonas thought. It was obvious that it saddened The Giver very deeply. But it didn't seem such a terrible thing, after all. And he, Jonas, would never have done it—never have requested release, no matter how difficult his training became. The Giver needed a successor, and he had been chosen.

A thought occurred to Jonas. Rosemary had been released very early in her training. What if something happened to him, Jonas? He had a whole year's worth of memories now.

"Giver," he asked, "I can't request release, I know that. But what if something happened: an accident? What if I fell into the river like the little Four, Caleb, did? Well, that doesn't make sense because I'm a good swimmer. But what if I couldn't swim, and fell into the river and was lost? Then there wouldn't be a new Receiver, but you would already have given away an awful lot of important memories, so even though they would select a new Receiver, the memories would be gone except for the shreds that you have left of them? And then what if—"

He started to laugh, suddenly. "I sound like my sister, Lily," he said, amused at himself.

The Giver looked at him gravely. "You just stay away from the river, my friend," he said. "The community lost Rosemary after five weeks and it was a disaster for them. I don't know *what* the community would do if they lost you."

"Why was it a disaster?"

"I think I mentioned to you once," The Giver reminded him, "that when she was gone, the memories came back to the people. If you were to be lost in the river, Jonas, your memories would not be lost with you. Memories are *forever*.

"Rosemary had only those five weeks worth, and most of them were good ones. But there were those few terrible memories, the ones that had overwhelmed her. For a while they overwhelmed the community. All those *feelings!* They'd never experienced that before.

"I was so devastated by my own grief at her loss, and my own feeling of failure, that I didn't even try to help them through it. I was angry, too."

The Giver was quiet for a moment, obviously thinking. "You know," he said, finally, "if they lost *you*, with all the training you've had now, they'd have all those memories again themselves."

Jonas made a face. "They'd hate that."

“They certainly would. They wouldn’t know how to deal with it at all.”

“The only way *I* deal with it is by having you there to help me,” Jonas pointed out with a sigh.

The Giver nodded. “I suppose,” he said slowly, “that I could—”

“You could what?”

The Giver was still deep in thought. After a moment, he said, “If you floated off in the river, I suppose I could help the whole community the way I’ve helped you. It’s an interesting concept. I need to think about it some more. Maybe we’ll talk about it again sometime. But not now.

“I’m glad you’re a good swimmer, Jonas. But stay away from the river.” He laughed a little, but the laughter was not lighthearted. His thoughts seemed to be elsewhere, and his eyes were very troubled.

Nineteen

JONAS GLANCED AT the clock. There was so much work to be done, always, that he and The Giver seldom simply sat and talked, the way they just had.

"I'm sorry that I wasted so much time with my questions," Jonas said. "I was only asking about release because my father is releasing a newchild today. A twin. He has to select one and release the other one. They do it by weight." Jonas glanced at the clock. "Actually, I suppose he's already finished. I think it was this morning."

The Giver's face took on a solemn look. "I wish they wouldn't do that," he said quietly, almost to himself.

"Well, they can't have two identical people around! Think how confusing it would be!" Jonas chuckled.

"I wish I could watch," he added, as an afterthought. He liked the thought of seeing his father perform the ceremony, and making the little twin clean and comfy. His father was such a gentle man.

"You can watch," The Giver said.

"No," Jonas told him. "They never let children watch. It's very private."

"Jonas," The Giver told him, "I know that you read your training instructions very carefully. Don't you remember that you are allowed to ask anyone anything?"

Jonas nodded. "Yes, but—"

"Jonas, when you and I have finished our time together, you will be the new Receiver. You can read the books; you'll have the memories. You have access to *everything*. It's part of your training. If you want to watch a release, you have simply to ask."

Jonas shrugged. "Well, maybe I will, then. But it's too late for this one. I'm sure it was this morning."

The Giver told him, then, something he had not known. "All private ceremonies are recorded. They're in the Hall of Closed Records. *Do you want to see this morning's release?*"

Jonas hesitated. He was afraid that his father wouldn't like it, if he watched something so private.

"I think you should," The Giver told him firmly.

"All right, then," Jonas said. "Tell me how."

The Giver rose from his chair, went to the speaker on the wall, and clicked the switch from OFF to ON.

The voice spoke immediately. “Yes, Receiver. How may I help you?”

“I would like to see this morning’s release of the twin.”

“One moment, Receiver. Thank you for your instructions.”

Jonas watched the video screen above the row of switches. Its blank face began to flicker with zig-zag lines; then some numbers appeared, followed by the date and time. He was astonished and delighted that this was available to him, and surprised that he had not known.

Suddenly he could see a small windowless room, empty except for a bed, a table with some equipment on it—Jonas recognized a scale; he had seen them before, when he’d been doing volunteer hours at the Nurturing Center—and a cupboard. He could see pale carpeting on the floor.

“It’s just an ordinary room,” he commented. “I thought maybe they’d have it in the Auditorium, so that everybody could come. All the Old go to Ceremonies of Release. But I suppose that when it’s just a newborn, they don’t—”

“Shhh,” The Giver said, his eyes on the screen.

Jonas’s father, wearing his nurturing uniform, entered the room, cradling a tiny newchild wrapped in a soft blanket in his arms. A uniformed woman followed through the door, carrying a second newchild wrapped in a similar blanket.

“That’s my father.” Jonas found himself whispering, as if he might wake the little ones if he spoke aloud. “And the other Nurturer is his assistant. She’s still in training, but she’ll be finished soon.”

The two Nurturers unwrapped the blankets and laid the identical newborns on the bed. They were naked. Jonas could see that they were males.

He watched, fascinated, as his father gently lifted one and then the other to the scale and weighed them.

He heard his father laugh. “Good,” his father said to the woman. “I thought for a moment that they might both be exactly the same. *Then* we’d have a problem. But this one,” he handed one, after rewrapping it, to his assistant, “is six pounds even. So you can clean him up and dress him and take him over to the Center.”

The woman took the newchild and left through the door she had entered.

Jonas watched as his father bent over the squirming newchild on the bed. “And you, little guy, you’re only five pounds ten ounces. A *shrimp!*”

“That’s the special voice he uses with Gabriel,” Jonas remarked, smiling.

“Watch,” The Giver said.

“Now he cleans him up and makes him comfy,” Jonas told him. “He told me.”

“Be quiet, Jonas,” The Giver commanded in a strange voice. “*Watch*.”

Obediently Jonas concentrated on the screen, waiting for what would happen next. He was especially curious about the ceremony part.

His father turned and opened the cupboard. He took out a syringe and a small bottle. Very carefully he inserted the needle into the bottle and began to fill the syringe with a clear liquid.

Jonas winced sympathetically. He had forgotten that newchildren had to get shots. He hated shots himself, though he knew that they were necessary.

To his surprise, his father began very carefully to direct the needle into the top of newchild’s forehead, puncturing the place where the fragile skin pulsed. The newborn squirmed, and wailed faintly.

“Why’s he—”

“Shhh,” The Giver said sharply.

His father was talking, and Jonas realized that he was hearing the answer to the question he had started to ask. Still in the special voice, his father was saying, “I know, I know. It hurts, little guy. But I have to use a vein, and the veins in your arms are still too teeny-weeny.”

He pushed the plunger very slowly, injecting the liquid into the scalp vein until the syringe was empty.

“All done. That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Jonas heard his father say cheerfully. He turned aside and dropped the syringe into a waste receptacle.

Now he cleans him up and makes him comfy, Jonas said to himself, aware that The Giver didn’t want to talk during the little ceremony.

As he continued to watch, the newchild, no longer crying, moved his arms and legs in a jerking motion. Then he went limp. His head fell to the side, his eyes half open. Then he was still.

With an odd, shocked feeling, Jonas recognized the gestures and posture and expression. They were familiar. He had seen them before. But he

couldn’t remember where.

Jonas stared at the screen, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did. The little twin lay motionless. His father was putting things away. Folding the blanket. Closing the cupboard.

Once again, as he had on the playing field, he felt the choking sensation. Once again he saw the face of the light-haired, bloodied soldier as life left his eyes. The memory came back.

He killed it! My father killed it! Jonas said to himself, stunned at what he was realizing. He continued to stare at the screen numbly.

His father tidied the room. Then he picked up a small carton that lay waiting on the floor, set it on the bed, and lifted the limp body into it. He placed the lid on tightly.

He picked up the carton and carried it to the other side of the room. He opened a small door in the wall; Jonas could see darkness behind the door. It seemed to be the same sort of chute into which trash was deposited at school.

His father loaded the carton containing the body into the chute and gave it a shove.

“Bye-bye, little guy,” Jonas heard his father say before he left the room. Then the screen went blank.

The Giver turned to him. Quite calmly, he related, “When the Speaker notified me that Rosemary had applied for release, they turned on the tape to show me the process. There she was—my last glimpse of that beautiful child—waiting. They brought in the syringe and asked her to roll up her sleeve.

“You suggested, Jonas, that perhaps she wasn’t brave enough? I don’t know about bravery: what it is, what it means. I do know that I sat here numb with horror. Wretched with helplessness. And I listened as Rosemary told them that she would prefer to inject herself.

“Then she did so. I didn’t watch. I looked away.”

The Giver turned to him. “Well, there you are, Jonas. You were wondering about release,” he said in a bitter voice.

Jonas felt a ripping sensation inside himself, the feeling of terrible pain clawing its way forward to emerge in a cry.

Twenty

"I WON'T! I WON'T go home! You can't make me!" Jonas sobbed and shouted and pounded the bed with his fists.

"Sit up, Jonas," The Giver told him firmly.

Jonas obeyed him. Weeping, shuddering, he sat on the edge of the bed. He would not look at The Giver.

"You may stay here tonight. I want to talk to you. But you must be quiet now, while I notify your family unit. No one must hear you cry."

Jonas looked up wildly. "No one heard that little twin cry, either! No one but my father!" He collapsed in sobs again.

The Giver waited silently. Finally Jonas was able to quiet himself and he sat huddled, his shoulders shaking.

The Giver went to the wall speaker and clicked the switch to ON.

"Yes, Receiver. How may I help you?"

"Notify the new Receiver's family unit that he will be staying with me tonight, for additional training."

"I will take care of that, sir. Thank you for your instructions," the voice said.

"I will take care of that, sir. I will take care of that, sir," Jonas mimicked in a cruel, sarcastic voice. "I will do whatever you like, sir. I will kill people, sir. Old people? Small newborn people? I'd be happy to kill them, sir. Thank you for your instructions, sir. How may I help y—" He couldn't seem to stop.

The Giver grasped his shoulders firmly. Jonas fell silent and stared at him.

"Listen to me, Jonas. They can't help it. *They know nothing*."

"You said that to me once before."

"I said it because it's true. It's the way they live. It's the life that was created for them. It's the same life that you would have, if you had not been chosen as my successor."

"But he *lied* to me!" Jonas wept.

"It's what he was told to do, and he knows nothing else."

"What about you? Do *you* lie to me, too?" Jonas almost spat the question at The Giver.

“I am empowered to lie. But I have never lied to you.”

Jonas stared at him. “Release is always like that? For people who break the rules three times? For the *Old?* Do they kill the Old, too?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“And what about Fiona? She loves the Old! She’s in training to care for them. Does she know yet? What will she do when she finds out? How will she feel?” Jonas brushed wetness from his face with the back of one hand.

“Fiona is already being trained in the fine art of release,” The Giver told him. “She’s very efficient at her work, your red-haired friend. Feelings are not part of the life she’s learned.”

Jonas wrapped his arms around himself and rocked his own body back and forth. “What should I do? I can’t go back! I can’t!”

The Giver stood up. “First, I will order our evening meal. Then we will eat.”

Jonas found himself using the nasty, sarcastic voice again. “Then we’ll have a sharing of feelings?”

The Giver gave a rueful, anguished, empty laugh. “Jonas, you and I are the only ones who *have* feelings. We’ve been sharing them now for almost a year.”

“I’m sorry, Giver,” Jonas said miserably. “I don’t mean to be so hateful. Not to you.”

The Giver rubbed Jonas’s hunched shoulders. “And after we eat,” he went on, “we’ll make a plan.”

Jonas looked up, puzzled. “A plan for what? There’s nothing. There’s nothing we can do. It’s always been this way. Before me, before you, before the ones who came before you. Back and back and back.” His voice trailed the familiar phrase.

“Jonas,” The Giver said, after a moment, “it’s true that it has been this way for what seems forever. But the memories tell us that it has not *always* been. People felt things once. You and I have been part of that, so we know. We know that they once felt things like pride, and sorrow, and —”

“And love,” Jonas added, remembering the family scene that had so affected him. “And pain.” He thought again of the soldier.

“The worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It’s the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared.”

“I’ve started to share them with you,” Jonas said, trying to cheer him.

“That’s true. And having you here with me over the past year has made me realize that things must change. For years I’ve felt that they should, but it seemed so hopeless.

“Now for the first time I think there might be a way,” The Giver said slowly. “And you brought it to my attention, barely—” He glanced at the clock. “two hours ago.”

Jonas watched him, and listened.

It was late at night, now. They had talked and talked. Jonas sat wrapped in a robe belonging to The Giver, the long robe that only Elders wore.

It was possible, what they had planned. Barely possible. If it failed, he would very likely be killed.

But what did that matter? If he stayed, his life was no longer worth living.

“Yes,” he told The Giver. “I’ll do it. I think I can do it. I’ll try, anyway. But I want you to come with me.”

The Giver shook his head. “Jonas,” he said, “the community has depended, all these generations, back and back and back, on a resident Receiver to hold their memories for them. I’ve turned over many of them to you in the past year. And I can’t take them back. There’s no way for me to get them back if I have given them.

“So if you escape, once you are gone—and, Jonas, you know that you can never return—”

Jonas nodded solemnly. It was the terrifying part. “Yes,” he said, “I know. But if you come with me—”

The Giver shook his head and made a gesture to silence him. He continued. “If you get away, if you get beyond, if you get to Elsewhere, it will mean that the community has to bear the burden themselves, of the memories you had been holding for them.

“I think that they can, and that they will acquire some wisdom. But it will be desperately hard for them. When we lost Rosemary ten years ago, and her memories returned to the people, they panicked. And those were such few memories, compared to yours. When your memories return, they’ll need help. Remember how I helped you in the beginning, when the receiving of memories was new to you?”

Jonas nodded. “It was scary at first. And it hurt a lot.”

“You needed me then. And now they will.”

“It’s no use. They’ll find someone to take my place. They’ll choose a new Receiver.”

“There’s no one ready for training, not right away. Oh, they’ll speed up the selection, of course. But I can’t think of another child who has the right qualities—”

“There’s a little female with pale eyes. But she’s only a Six.”

“That’s correct. I know the one you mean. Her name is Katharine. But she’s too young. So they will be *forced* to bear those memories.”

“I want you to come, Giver,” Jonas pleaded.

“No. I have to stay here,” The Giver said firmly. “I want to, Jonas. If I go with you, and together we take away *all* their protection from the memories, Jonas, the community will be left with no one to help them. They’ll be thrown into chaos. They’ll destroy themselves. I can’t go.”

“Giver,” Jonas suggested, “you and I don’t need to *care* about the rest of them.”

The Giver looked at him with a questioning smile. Jonas hung his head. Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything.

“And in any case, Jonas,” The Giver sighed, “I wouldn’t make it. I’m very weakened now. Do you know that I no longer see colors?”

Jonas’s heart broke. He reached for The Giver’s hand.

“You have the colors,” The Giver told him. “And you have the courage. I will help you to have the strength.”

“A year ago,” Jonas reminded him, “when I had just become a Twelve, when I began to see the first color, you told me that the beginning had been different for you. But that I wouldn’t understand.”

The Giver brightened. “That’s true. And do you know, Jonas, that with all your knowledge now, with all your memories, with all you’ve learned —*still* you won’t understand? Because I’ve been a little selfish. I haven’t given any of it to you. I wanted to keep it for myself to the last.”

“Keep what?”

“When I was just a boy, younger than you, it began to come to me. But it wasn’t the seeing-beyond for me. It was different. For me, it was *hearing*-beyond.”

Jonas frowned, trying to figure that out. “What did you hear?” he asked.

“Music,” The Giver said, smiling. “I began to hear something truly remarkable, and it is called music. I’ll give you some before I go.”

Jonas shook his head emphatically. “No, Giver,” he said. “I want you to keep that, to have with you, when I’m gone.”

Jonas went home the next morning, cheerfully greeted his parents, and lied easily about what a busy, pleasant night he had had.

His father smiled and lied easily, too, about his busy and pleasant day the day before.

Throughout the school day, as he did his lessons, Jonas went over the plan in his head. It seemed startlingly simple. Jonas and The Giver had gone over it and over it, late into the night hours.

For the next two weeks, as the time for the December Ceremony approached, The Giver would transfer every memory of courage and strength that he could to Jonas. He would need those to help him find the Elsewhere that they were both sure existed. They knew it would be a very difficult journey.

Then, in the middle of the night before the Ceremony, Jonas would secretly leave his dwelling. This was probably the most dangerous part, because it was a violation of a major rule for any citizen not on official business to leave a dwelling at night.

“I’ll leave at midnight,” Jonas said. “The Food Collectors will be finished picking up the evening-meal remains by then, and the Path-Maintenance Crews don’t start their work that early. So there won’t be anyone to see me, unless of course someone is out on emergency business.”

“I don’t know what you should do if you are seen, Jonas,” The Giver had said. “I have memories, of course, of all kinds of escapes. People fleeing from terrible things throughout history. But every situation is individual. There is no memory of one like this.”

“I’ll be careful,” Jonas said. “No one will see me.”

“As Receiver-in-training, you’re held in very high respect already. So I think you wouldn’t be questioned very forcefully.”

“I’d just say I was on some important errand for the Receiver. I’d say it was all your fault that I was out after hours,” Jonas teased.

They both laughed a little nervously. But Jonas was certain that he could slip away, unseen, from his house, carrying an extra set of clothing. Silently he would take his bicycle to the riverbank and leave it there hidden in bushes with the clothing folded beside it.

Then he would make his way through the darkness, on foot, silently, to the Annex.

"There's no nighttime attendant," The Giver explained. "I'll leave the door unlocked. You simply slip into the room. I'll be waiting for you."

His parents would discover, when they woke, that he was gone. They would also find a cheerful note from Jonas on his bed, telling them that he was going for an early morning ride along the river; that he would be back for the Ceremony.

His parents would be irritated but not alarmed. They would think him inconsiderate and they would plan to chastise him, later.

They would wait, with mounting anger, for him; finally they would be forced to go, taking Lily to the Ceremony without him.

"They won't say anything to anyone, though," Jonas said, quite certain. "They won't call attention to my rudeness because it would reflect on their parenting. And anyway, everyone is so involved in the Ceremony that they probably won't notice that I'm not there. Now that I'm a Twelve and in training, I don't have to sit with my age group any more. So Asher will think I'm with my parents, or with you—"

"And your parents will assume you're with Asher, or with me—"

Jonas shrugged. "It will take everyone a while to realize that I'm not there at all."

"And you and I will be long on our way by then."

In the early morning, The Giver would order a vehicle and driver from the Speaker. He visited the other communities frequently, meeting with their Elders; his responsibilities extended over all the surrounding areas. So this would not be an unusual undertaking.

Ordinarily The Giver did not attend the December Ceremony. Last year he had been present because of the occasion of Jonas's selection, in which he was so involved. But his life was usually quite separate from that of the community. No one would comment on his absence, or on the fact that he had chosen this day to be away.

When the driver and vehicle arrived, The Giver would send the driver on some brief errand. During his absence, The Giver would help Jonas hide in the storage area of the vehicle. He would have with him a bundle of food which The Giver would save from his own meals during the next two weeks.

The Ceremony would begin, with all the community there, and by then Jonas and The Giver would be on their way.

By midday Jonas's absence would become apparent, and would be a cause for serious concern. The Ceremony would not be disrupted—such a disruption would be unthinkable. But searchers would be sent out into the community.

By the time his bicycle and clothing were found, The Giver would be returning. Jonas, by then, would be on his own, making his journey Elsewhere.

The Giver, on his return, would find the community in a state of confusion and panic. Confronted by a situation which they had never faced before, and having no memories from which to find either solace or wisdom, they would not know what to do and would seek his advice.

He would go to the Auditorium where the people would be gathered, still. He would stride to the stage and command their attention.

He would make the solemn announcement that Jonas had been lost in the river. He would immediately begin the Ceremony of Loss.

"Jonas, Jonas," they would say loudly, as they had once said the name of Caleb. The Giver would lead the chant. Together they would let Jonas's presence in their lives fade away as they said his name in unison more slowly, softer and softer, until he was disappearing from them, until he was no more than an occasional murmur and then, by the end of the long day, gone forever, not to be mentioned again.

Their attention would turn to the overwhelming task of bearing the memories themselves. The Giver would help them.

"Yes, I understand that they'll need you," Jonas had said at the end of the lengthy discussion and planning. "But I'll need you, too. Please come with me." He knew the answer even as he made the final plea.

"My work will be finished," The Giver had replied gently, "when I have helped the community to change and become whole.

"I'm grateful to you, Jonas, because without you I would never have figured out a way to bring about the change. But your role now is to escape. And my role is to stay."

"But don't you *want* to be with me, Giver?" Jonas asked sadly.

The Giver hugged him. "I love you, Jonas," he said. "But I have another place to go. When my work here is finished, I want to be with my

daughter.”

Jonas had been staring glumly at the floor. Now he looked up, startled. “I didn’t know you had a daughter, Giver! You told me that you’d had a spouse. But I never knew about your daughter.”

The Giver smiled, and nodded. For the first time in their long months together, Jonas saw him look truly happy.

“Her name was Rosemary,” The Giver said.

Twenty-one

IT WOULD WORK. They could make it work, Jonas told himself again and again throughout the day.

But that evening everything changed. All of it—all the things they had thought through so meticulously—fell apart.

That night, Jonas was forced to flee. He left the dwelling shortly after the sky became dark and the community still. It was terribly dangerous because some of the work crews were still about, but he moved stealthily and silently, staying in the shadows, making his way past the darkened dwellings and the empty Central Plaza, toward the river. Beyond the Plaza he could see the House of the Old, with the Annex behind it, outlined against the night sky. But he could not stop there. There was no time. Every minute counted now, and every minute must take him farther from the community.

Now he was on the bridge, hunched over on the bicycle, pedaling steadily. He could see the dark, churning water far below.

He felt, surprisingly, no fear, nor any regret at leaving the community behind. But he felt a very deep sadness that he had left his closest friend behind. He knew that in the danger of his escape he must be absolutely silent; but with his heart and mind, he called back and hoped that with his capacity for hearing-beyond, The Giver would know that Jonas had said goodbye.

It had happened at the evening meal. The family unit was eating together as always: Lily chattering away, Mother and Father making their customary comments (and lies, Jonas knew) about the day. Nearby, Gabriel played happily on the floor, babbling his baby talk, looking with glee now and then toward Jonas, obviously delighted to have him back after the unexpected night away from the dwelling.

Father glanced down toward the toddler. “Enjoy it, little guy,” he said. “This is your last night as visitor.”

“What do you mean?” Jonas asked him.

Father sighed with disappointment. “Well, you know he wasn’t here when you got home this morning because we had him stay overnight at the Nurturing Center. It seemed like a good opportunity, with you gone, to give it a try. He’d been sleeping so soundly.”

“Didn’t it go well?” Mother asked sympathetically.

Father gave a rueful laugh. “That’s an understatement. It was a disaster. He cried all night, apparently. The night crew couldn’t handle it. They were *really* frazzled by the time I got to work.”

“Gabe, you naughty thing,” Lily said, with a scolding little cluck toward the grinning toddler on the floor.

“So,” Father went on, “we obviously had to make the decision. Even *I* voted for Gabriel’s release when we had the meeting this afternoon.”

Jonas put down his fork and stared at his father. “Release?” he asked.

Father nodded. “We certainly gave it our best try, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did,” Mother agreed emphatically.

Lily nodded in agreement, too.

Jonas worked at keeping his voice absolutely calm. “When?” he asked. “When will he be released?”

“First thing tomorrow morning. We have to start our preparations for the Naming Ceremony, so we thought we’d get this taken care of right away.

“It’s bye-bye to you, Gabe, in the morning,” Father had said, in his sweet, sing-song voice.

Jonas reached the opposite side of the river, stopped briefly, and looked back. The community where his entire life had been lived lay behind him now, sleeping. At dawn, the orderly, disciplined life he had always known would continue again, without him. The life where nothing was ever unexpected. Or inconvenient. Or unusual. The life without color, pain, or past.

He pushed firmly again at the pedal with his foot and continued riding along the road. It was not safe to spend time looking back. He thought of the rules he had broken so far: enough that if he were caught, now, he would be condemned.

First, he had left the dwelling at night. A major transgression.

Second, he had robbed the community of food: a very serious crime, even though what he had taken was leftovers, set out on the dwelling

doorsteps for collection.

Third, he had stolen his father's bicycle. He had hesitated for a moment, standing beside the bikeport in the darkness, not wanting anything of his father's and uncertain, as well, whether he could comfortably ride the larger bike when he was so accustomed to his own.

But it was necessary because it had the child seat attached to the back.

And he had taken Gabriel, too.

He could feel the little head nudge his back, bouncing gently against him as he rode. Gabriel was sleeping soundly, strapped into the seat. Before he had left the dwelling, he had laid his hands firmly on Gabe's back and transmitted to him the most soothing memory he could: a slow-swinging hammock under palm trees on an island someplace, at evening, with a rhythmic sound of languid water lapping hypnotically against a beach nearby. As the memory seeped from him into the newchild, he could feel Gabe's sleep ease and deepen. There had been no stir at all when Jonas lifted him from the crib and placed him gently into the molded seat.

He knew that he had the remaining hours of night before they would be aware of his escape. So he rode hard, steadily, willing himself not to tire as the minutes and miles passed. There had been no time to receive the memories he and The Giver had counted on, of strength and courage. So he relied on what he had, and hoped it would be enough.

He circled the outlying communities, their dwellings dark. Gradually the distances between communities widened, with longer stretches of empty road. His legs ached at first; then, as time passed, they became numb.

At dawn Gabriel began to stir. They were in an isolated place; fields on either side of the road were dotted with thickets of trees here and there. He saw a stream, and made his way to it across a rutted, bumpy meadow; Gabriel, wide awake now, giggled as the bicycle jolted him up and down.

Jonas unstrapped Gabe, lifted him from the bike, and watched him investigate the grass and twigs with delight. Carefully he hid the bicycle in thick bushes.

"Morning meal, Gabe!" He unwrapped some of the food and fed them both. Then he filled the cup he had brought with water from the stream and held it for Gabriel to drink. He drank thirstily himself, and sat by the stream, watching the newchild play.

He was exhausted. He knew he must sleep, resting his own muscles and preparing himself for more hours on the bicycle. It would not be safe to travel in daylight.

They would be looking for him soon.

He found a place deeply hidden in the trees, took the newchild there, and lay down, holding Gabriel in his arms. Gabe struggled cheerfully as if it were a wrestling game, the kind they had played back in the dwelling, with tickles and laughter.

"Sorry, Gabe," Jonas told him. "I know it's morning, and I know you just woke up. But we have to sleep now."

He cuddled the small body close to him, and rubbed the little back. He murmured to Gabriel soothingly. Then he pressed his hands firmly and transmitted a memory of deep, contented exhaustion. Gabriel's head nodded, after a moment, and fell against Jonas's chest.

Together the fugitives slept through the first dangerous day.

The most terrifying thing was the planes. By now, days had passed; Jonas no longer knew how many. The journey had become automatic: the sleep by days, hidden in underbrush and trees; the finding of water; the careful division of scraps of food, augmented by what he could find in the fields. And the endless, endless miles on the bicycle by night.

His leg muscles were taut now. They ached when he settled himself to sleep. But they were stronger, and he stopped now less often to rest. Sometimes he paused and lifted Gabriel down for a brief bit of exercise, running down the road or through a field together in the dark. But always, when he returned, strapped the uncomplaining toddler into the seat again, and remounted, his legs were ready.

So he had enough strength of his own, and had not needed what The Giver might have provided, had there been time.

But when the planes came, he wished that he could have received the courage.

He knew they were search planes. They flew so low that they woke him with the noise of their engines, and sometimes, looking out and up fearfully from the hiding places, he could almost see the faces of the searchers.

He knew that they could not see color, and that their flesh, as well as Gabriel's light golden curls, would be no more than smears of gray against

the colorless foliage. But he remembered from his science and technology studies at school that the search planes used heat-seeking devices which could identify body warmth and would hone in on two humans huddled in shrubbery.

So always, when he heard the aircraft sound, he reached to Gabriel and transmitted memories of snow, keeping some for himself. Together they became cold; and when the planes were gone, they would shiver, holding each other, until sleep came again.

Sometimes, urging the memories into Gabriel, Jonas felt that they were more shallow, a little weaker than they had been. It was what he had hoped, and what he and The Giver had planned: that as he moved away from the community, he would shed the memories and leave them behind for the people. But now, when he needed them, when the planes came, he tried hard to cling to what he still had, of cold, and to use it for their survival.

Usually the aircraft came by day, when they were hiding. But he was alert at night, too, on the road, always listening intently for the sound of the engines. Even Gabriel listened, and would call out, “Plane! Plane!” sometimes before Jonas had heard the terrifying noise. When the aircraft searchers came, as they did occasionally, during the night as they rode, Jonas sped to the nearest tree or bush, dropped to the ground, and made himself and Gabriel cold. But it was sometimes a frighteningly close call.

As he pedaled through the nights, through isolated landscape now, with the communities far behind and no sign of human habitation around him or ahead, he was constantly vigilant, looking for the next nearest hiding place should the sound of engines come.

But the frequency of the planes diminished. They came less often, and flew, when they did come, less slowly, as if the search had become haphazard and no longer hopeful. Finally there was an entire day and night when they did not come at all.

Twenty-two

NOW THE LANDSCAPE was changing. It was a subtle change, hard to identify at first. The road was narrower, and bumpy, apparently no longer tended by road crews. It was harder, suddenly, to balance on the bike, as the front wheel wobbled over stones and ruts.

One night Jonas fell, when the bike jolted to a sudden stop against a rock. He grabbed instinctively for Gabriel; and the newchild, strapped tightly in his seat, was uninjured, only frightened when the bike fell to its side. But Jonas's ankle was twisted, and his knees were scraped and raw, blood seeping through his torn trousers. Painfully he righted himself and the bike, and reassured Gabe.

Tentatively he began to ride in daylight. He had forgotten the fear of the searchers, who seemed to have diminished into the past. But now there were new fears; the unfamiliar landscape held hidden, unknown perils.

Trees became more numerous, and the forests beside the road were dark and thick with mystery. They saw streams more frequently now and stopped often to drink. Jonas carefully washed his injured knees, wincing as he rubbed at the raw flesh. The constant ache of his swollen ankle was eased when he soaked it occasionally in the cold water that rushed through roadside gullies.

He was newly aware that Gabriel's safety depended entirely upon his own continued strength.

They saw their first waterfall, and for the first time wildlife.

"Plane! Plane!" Gabriel called, and Jonas turned swiftly into the trees, though he had not seen planes in days, and he did not hear an aircraft engine now. When he stopped the bicycle in the shrubbery and turned to grab Gabe, he saw the small chubby arm pointing toward the sky.

Terrified, he looked up, but it was not a plane at all. Though he had never seen one before, he identified it from his fading memories, for The Giver had given them to him often. It was a bird.

Soon there were many birds along the way, soaring overhead, calling. They saw deer; and once, beside the road, looking at them curious and unafraid, a small reddish-brown creature with a thick tail, whose name

Jonas did not know. He slowed the bike and they stared at one another until the creature turned away and disappeared into the woods.

All of it was new to him. After a life of Sameness and predictability, he was awed by the surprises that lay beyond each curve of the road. He slowed the bike again and again to look with wonder at wildflowers, to enjoy the throaty warble of a new bird nearby, or merely to watch the way wind shifted the leaves in the trees. During his twelve years in the community, he had never felt such simple moments of exquisite happiness.

But there were desperate fears building in him now as well. The most relentless of his new fears was that they would starve. Now that they had left the cultivated fields behind them, it was almost impossible to find food. They finished the meager store of potatoes and carrots they had saved from the last agricultural area, and now they were always hungry.

Jonas knelt by a stream and tried without success to catch a fish with his hands. Frustrated, he threw rocks into the water, knowing even as he did so that it was useless. Finally, in desperation, he fashioned a makeshift net, looping the strands of Gabriel's blanket around a curved stick.

After countless tries, the net yielded two flopping silvery fish. Methodically Jonas hacked them to pieces with a sharp rock and fed the raw shreds to himself and to Gabriel. They ate some berries, and tried without success to catch a bird.

At night, while Gabriel slept beside him, Jonas lay awake, tortured by hunger, and remembered his life in the community where meals were delivered to each dwelling every day.

He tried to use the flagging power of his memory to recreate meals, and managed brief, tantalizing fragments: banquets with huge roasted meats; birthday parties with thick-frosted cakes; and lush fruits picked and eaten, sun-warmed and dripping, from trees.

But when the memory glimpses subsided, he was left with the gnawing, painful emptiness. Jonas remembered, suddenly and grimly, the time in his childhood when he had been chastised for misusing a word. The word had been "starving." You have never been starving, he had been told. You will never be starving.

Now he was. If he had stayed in the community, he would not be. It was as simple as that. Once he had yearned for choice. Then, when he had had a choice, he had made the wrong one: the choice to leave. And now he was starving.

But if he had stayed . . .

His thoughts continued. If he had stayed, he would have starved in other ways. He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love.

And Gabriel? For Gabriel there would have been no life at all. So there had not really been a choice.

It became a struggle to ride the bicycle as Jonas weakened from lack of food, and realized at the same time that he was encountering something he had for a long time yearned to see: hills. His sprained ankle throbbed as he forced the pedal downward in an effort that was almost beyond him.

And the weather was changing. It rained for two days. Jonas had never seen rain, though he had experienced it often in the memories. He had liked those rains, enjoyed the new feeling of it, but this was different. He and Gabriel became cold and wet, and it was hard to get dry, even when sunshine occasionally followed.

Gabriel had not cried during the long frightening journey. Now he did. He cried because he was hungry and cold and terribly weak. Jonas cried, too, for the same reasons, and another reason as well. He wept because he was afraid now that he could not save Gabriel. He no longer cared about himself.

Twenty-three

JONAS FELT MORE and more certain that the destination lay ahead of him, very near now in the night that was approaching. None of his senses confirmed it. He saw nothing ahead except the endless ribbon of road unfolding in twisting narrow curves. He heard no sound ahead.

Yet he felt it: felt that Elsewhere was not far away. But he had little hope left that he would be able to reach it. His hope diminished further when the sharp, cold air began to blur and thicken with swirling white.

Gabriel, wrapped in his inadequate blanket, was hunched, shivering, and silent in his little seat. Jonas stopped the bike wearily, lifted the child down, and realized with heartbreak how cold and weak Gabe had become.

Standing in the freezing mound that was thickening around his numb feet, Jonas opened his own tunic, held Gabriel to his bare chest, and tied the torn and dirty blanket around them both. Gabriel moved feebly against him and whimpered briefly into the silence that surrounded them.

Dimly, from a nearly forgotten perception as blurred as the substance itself, Jonas recalled what the whiteness was.

"It's called snow, Gabe," Jonas whispered. "*Snowflakes*. They fall down from the sky, and they're very beautiful."

There was no response from the child who had once been so curious and alert. Jonas looked down through the dusk at the little head against his chest. Gabriel's curly hair was matted and filthy, and there were tearstains outlined in dirt on his pale cheeks. His eyes were closed. As Jonas watched, a snowflake drifted down and was caught briefly for a moment's sparkle in the tiny fluttering eyelashes.

Wearily he remounted the bicycle. A steep hill loomed ahead. In the best of conditions, the hill would have been a difficult, demanding ride. But now the rapidly deepening snow obscured the narrow road and made the ride impossible. His front wheel moved forward imperceptibly as he pushed on the pedals with his numb, exhausted legs. But the bicycle stopped. It would not move.

He got off and let it drop sideways into the snow. For a moment he thought how easy it would be to drop beside it himself, to let himself and

Gabriel slide into the softness of snow, the darkness of night, the warm comfort of sleep.

But he had come this far. He must try to go on.

The memories had fallen behind him now, escaping from his protection to return to the people of his community. Were there any left at all? Could he hold onto a last bit of warmth? Did he still have the strength to Give? Could Gabriel still Receive?

He pressed his hands into Gabriel's back and tried to remember sunshine. For a moment it seemed that nothing came to him, that his power was completely gone. Then it flickered suddenly, and he felt tiny tongues of heat begin to creep across and into his frozen feet and legs. He felt his face begin to glow and the tense, cold skin of his arms and hands relax. For a fleeting second he felt that he wanted to keep it for himself, to let himself bathe in sunlight, unburdened by anything or anyone else.

But the moment passed and was followed by an urge, a need, a passionate yearning to share the warmth with the one person left for him to love. Aching from the effort, he forced the memory of warmth into the thin, shivering body in his arms.

Gabriel stirred. For a moment they both were bathed in warmth and renewed strength as they stood hugging each other in the blinding snow.

Jonas began to walk up the hill.

The memory was agonizingly brief. He had trudged no more than a few yards through the night when it was gone and they were cold again.

But his mind was alert now. Warming himself ever so briefly had shaken away the lethargy and resignation and restored his will to survive. He began to walk faster on feet that he could no longer feel. But the hill was treacherously steep; he was impeded by the snow and his own lack of strength. He didn't make it very far before he stumbled and fell forward.

On his knees, unable to rise, Jonas tried a second time. His consciousness grasped at a wisp of another warm memory, and tried desperately to hold it there, to enlarge it, and pass it into Gabriel. His spirits and strength lifted with the momentary warmth and he stood. Again, Gabriel stirred against him as he began to climb.

But the memory faded, leaving him colder than before.

If only he had had time to receive more warmth from The Giver before he escaped! Maybe there would be more left for him now. But there was no

purpose in if-onlys. His entire concentration now had to be on moving his feet, warming Gabriel and himself, and going forward.

He climbed, stopped, and warmed them both briefly again, with a tiny scrap of memory that seemed certainly to be all he had left.

The top of the hill seemed so far away, and he did not know what lay beyond. But there was nothing left to do but continue. He trudged upward.

As he approached the summit of the hill at last, something began to happen. He was not warmer; if anything, he felt more numb and more cold. He was not less exhausted; on the contrary, his steps were leaden, and he could barely move his freezing, tired legs.

But he began, suddenly, to feel happy. He began to recall happy times. He remembered his parents and his sister. He remembered his friends, Asher and Fiona. He remembered The Giver.

Memories of joy flooded through him suddenly.

He reached the place where the hill crested and he could feel the ground under his snow-covered feet become level. It would not be uphill anymore.

"We're almost there, Gabriel," he whispered, feeling quite certain without knowing why. "I remember this place, Gabe." And it was true. But it was not a grasping of a thin and burdensome recollection; this was different. This was something that he could keep. It was a memory of his own.

He hugged Gabriel and rubbed him briskly, warming him, to keep him alive. The wind was bitterly cold. The snow swirled, blurring his vision. But somewhere ahead, through the blinding storm, he knew there was warmth and light.

Using his final strength, and a special knowledge that was deep inside him, Jonas found the sled that was waiting for them at the top of the hill. Numbly his hands fumbled for the rope.

He settled himself on the sled and hugged Gabe close. The hill was steep but the snow was powdery and soft, and he knew that this time there would be no ice, no fall, no pain. Inside his freezing body, his heart surged with hope.

They started down.

Jonas felt himself losing consciousness and with his whole being willed himself to stay upright atop the sled, clutching Gabriel, keeping him safe. The runners sliced through the snow and the wind whipped at his face as they sped in a straight line through an incision that seemed to lead to the

final destination, the place that he had always felt was waiting, the Elsewhere that held their future and their past.

He forced his eyes open as they went downward, downward, sliding, and all at once he could see lights, and he recognized them now. He knew they were shining through the windows of rooms, that they were the red, blue, and yellow lights that twinkled from trees in places where families created and kept memories, where they celebrated love.

Downward, downward, faster and faster. Suddenly he was aware with certainty and joy that below, ahead, they were waiting for him; and that they were waiting, too, for the baby. For the first time, he heard something that he knew to be music. He heard people singing.

Behind him, across vast distances of space and time, from the place he had left, he thought he heard music too. But perhaps it was only an echo.

GATHERING BLUE

One

"MOTHER?"

There was no reply. She hadn't expected one. Her mother had been dead now for four days, and Kira could tell that the last of the spirit was drifting away.

"Mother." She said it again, quietly, to whatever was leaving. She thought that she could feel its leave-taking, the way one could feel a small whisper of breeze at night.

Now she was all alone. Kira felt the aloneness, the uncertainty, and a great sadness.

This had been her mother, the warm and vital woman whose name had been Katrina. Then after the brief and unexpected sickness, it had become the body of Katrina, still containing the lingering spirit. After four sunsets and sunrises, the spirit, too, was gone. It was simply a body. Diggers would come and sprinkle a layer of soil over the flesh, but even so it would be eaten by the clawing, hungry creatures that came at night. Then the bones would scatter, rot, and crumble to become part of the earth.

Kira wiped briefly at her eyes, which had filled suddenly with tears. She had loved her mother, and would miss her terribly. But it was time for her to go. She wedged her walking stick in the soft ground, leaned on it, and pulled herself up.

She looked around uncertainly. She was young still, and had not experienced death before, not in the small two-person family that she and her mother had been. Of course she had seen others go through the rituals. She could see some of them in the vast foul-smelling Field of Leaving, huddled beside the ones whose lingering spirits they tended. She knew that a woman named Helena was there, watching the spirit leave her infant, who had been born too soon. Helena had come to the Field only the day before. Infants did not require the four days of watching; the wisps of their spirits, barely arrived, drifted away quickly. So Helena would return to the village and her family soon.

As for Kira, she had no family, now. Nor any home. The cott she had shared with her mother had been burned. This was always done after sickness. The small structure, the only home Kira had ever known, was

gone. She had seen the smoke in the distance as she sat with the body. As she watched the spirit of her mother drift away, she had seen the cindered fragments of her childhood life whirl into the sky as well.

She felt a small shudder of fear. Fear was always a part of life for the people. Because of fear, they made shelter and found food and grew things. For the same reason, weapons were stored, waiting. There was fear of cold, of sickness and hunger. There was fear of beasts.

And fear propelled her now as she stood, leaning on her stick. She looked down a last time at the lifeless body that had once contained her mother, and considered where to go.

Kira thought about rebuilding. If she could find help, though help was unlikely, it wouldn't take long to build a cott, especially not this time of year, summer-start, when tree limbs were supple and mud was thick and abundant beside the river. She had often watched others building, and Kira realized that she could probably construct some sort of shelter for herself. Its corners and chimney might not be straight. The roof would be difficult because her bad leg made it almost impossible for her to climb. But she would find a way. Somehow she would build a cott. Then she would find a way to make a life.

Her mother's brother had been near her in the Field for two days, not guarding Katrina, his sister, but sitting silently beside the body of his own woman, the short-tempered Solora, and that of their new infant who had been too young to have a name. They had nodded to each other, Kira and her mother's brother, in acknowledgment. But he had departed, his time in the Field of Leaving finished. He had tykes to tend; he and Solora had two others in addition to the one that had brought about her death. The others were still small, their names yet of one syllable: Dan and Mar. *Perhaps I could care for them,* Kira thought briefly, trying to find her own future within the village. But even as the thought flickered within her, she knew that it would not be permitted. Solora's tykes would be given away, distributed to those who had none. Healthy, strong tykes were valuable; properly trained, they could contribute to family needs and would be greatly desired.

No one would desire Kira. No one ever had, except her mother. Often Katrina had told Kira the story of her birth—the birth of a fatherless girl with a twisted leg—and how her mother had fought to keep her alive.

“They came to take you,” Katrina said, whispering the story to her in the evening, in their cott, with the fire fed and glowing. “You were one day old, not yet named your one-syllable infant name—”

“Kir.”

“Yes, that’s right: Kir. They brought me food and were going to take you away to the Field—”

Kira shuddered. It was the way, the custom, and it was the merciful thing, to give an unnamed, imperfect infant back to the earth before its spirit had filled it and made it human. But it made her shudder.

Katrina stroked her daughter’s hair. “They meant no harm,” she reminded her.

Kira nodded. “They didn’t know it was *me*.”

“It *wasn’t* you, yet.”

“Tell me again why you told them no,” Kira whispered.

Her mother sighed, remembering. “I knew I would not have another child,” she pointed out. “Your father had been taken by beasts. It had been several months since he went off to hunt and did not return. And so I would not give birth again.

“Oh,” she added, “perhaps they would have given me one eventually, an orphan to raise. But as I held you—even then, with your spirit not yet arrived and with your leg bent wrong so that it was clear you would not ever run—even then, your eyes were bright. I could see the beginning of something remarkable in your eyes. And your fingers were long and well-shaped—”

“And strong. My hands were strong,” Kira added with satisfaction. She had heard the story so often; each time of hearing, she looked down at her strong hands with pride.

Her mother laughed. “So strong they gripped my own thumb fiercely and would not let go. Feeling that fierce tug on my thumb, I could not let them take you away. I simply told them no.”

“They were angry.”

“Yes. But I was firm. And, of course, my father was still alive. He was old then, four syllables, and he had been the leader of the people, the chief guardian, for a long time. They respected him. And your father would have been a greatly respected leader too had he not died on the long hunt. He had already been chosen to be a guardian.”

“Say my father’s name to me,” Kira begged.

Her mother smiled in the firelight. “Christopher,” she said. “You know that.”

“I like to hear it, though. I like to hear you say it.”

“Do you want me to go on?”

Kira nodded. “You were firm. You insisted,” she reminded her mother.

“Still, they made me promise that you would not become a burden.”

“I haven’t, have I?”

“Of course not. Your strong hands and wise head make up for the crippled leg. You are a sturdy and reliable helper in the weaving shed; all the women who work there say so. And one bent leg is of no importance when measured against your cleverness. The stories you tell to the tykes, the pictures you create with words—and with thread! The threading you do! It is unlike any threading the people have ever seen. Far beyond anything I could do!” Her mother stopped. She laughed. “Enough. You mustn’t tease me into flattery. Don’t forget that you are still a girl, and often willful, and just this morning, Kira, you forgot to tidy the cott even though you had promised.”

“I won’t forget tomorrow,” Kira said sleepily, snuggling against her mother on the raised sleeping mat. She pushed her twisted leg into a more comfortable position for the night. “I promise.”

But now there was no one to help her. She had no family left, and she was not a particularly useful person in the village. For everyday work, Kira helped in the weaving shed, picking up the scraps and leavings, but her twisted leg diminished her value as a laborer and even, in the future, as a mate.

Yes, the women liked the fanciful stories that she told to amuse restless tykes, and they admired the little threadings that she made. But those things were diversions; they were not work.

The sky, with the sun no longer overhead but sending shadows now into the Field of Leaving from the trees and thorn bushes at its edge, told her that it was long past midday. In her uncertainty she had lingered here too long. Carefully she gathered the skins on which she had slept these four nights guarding her mother’s spirit. Her fire was cold ashes, a blackened smudge. Her water container was empty and she had no more food.

Slowly, using her stick, she limped toward the path that led back to the village, holding on to a small hope that she might still be welcome there.

Tykes played at the edge of the clearing, scampering about on the moss-covered ground. Pine needles stuck to their naked bodies and in their hair. She smiled. She recognized each little one. There was the yellow-haired son of her mother's friend; she remembered his birth two mid-summers ago. And the girl whose twin had died; she was younger than the yellow-haired one, just toddling, but she giggled and shrieked with the others, playing catch-me-while-I'm-running. Tussling, the toddlers slapped and kicked at each other, grabbing toy-sticks, flailing with their small fists. Kira remembered watching her childhood companions at such play, preparing for the real scramble of adult life. Unable to participate because of her flawed leg, she had watched from the sidelines with envy.

An older child, a dirty-faced boy of eight or nine years, still too young for puberty and the two-syllable name that he would receive, looked over at her from the place where he was clearing underbrush and sorting the twigs into bundles for firestarting. Kira smiled. It was Matt, who had always been her friend. She liked Matt. He lived in the swampy, disagreeable Fen, probably the child of a dragger or digger. But he ran freely through the village with his disorderly friends, his dog always at his heels. Often he stopped, as now, to do some chore or small job in return for a few coins or a sweet. Kira called a greeting to the boy. The dog's bent tail, matted with twigs and leaves, thumped on the ground, and the boy grinned in reply.

"So you be back from the Field," he said. "What's it like there? Scared, was you? Did creatures come in the night?"

Kira shook her head and smiled at him. Younger, one-syllable tykes were not allowed in the Field, so it was natural that Matt would be curious and a little in awe. "No creatures," she reassured him. "I had fire, and it kept them away."

"So Katrina be gone now from her body?" he asked in his dialect. People from the Fen were oddly different. Always identifiable by their strange speech and crude manners, they were looked down upon by most people. But not by Kira. She was very fond of Matt.

She nodded. "My mother's spirit has gone," she acknowledged. "I watched it leave her body. It was like mist. It drifted away."

Matt came over to her, still carrying an armful of twigs. He squinted at her ruefully and wrinkled his nose. "Your cott is horrid burnt," he told her.

Kira nodded. She knew that her home had been destroyed, though secretly she had hoped she was mistaken. “Yes,” she sighed. “And everything in it? My frame? Did they burn my threading frame?”

Matt frowned. “I tried to save things but it’s mostly all burnt. Just your cott, Kira. Not like when there’s a big sickness. This time it just be your mum.”

“I know.” Kira sighed again. In the past there had been sicknesses that spread from one cott to the next, with many deaths. When that happened, a huge burning would take place, followed by a rebuilding that became almost festive with the noise of workers smearing wet mud over the fitted wooden sides of new structures, methodically slapping it into smoothness. The charred smell of the burning would remain in the air even as the new cotts rose.

But today there was no festivity. There were only the usual sounds. Katrina’s death had changed nothing in the lives of the people. She had been there. Now she was gone. Their lives continued.

With the boy still beside her, Kira paused at the well and filled her container with water. Everywhere she heard arguing. The cadence of bickering was a constant sound in the village: the harsh remarks of men vying for power; the shrill bragging and taunting of women envious of one another and irritable with the tykes who whined and whimpered at their feet and were frequently kicked out of the way.

She cupped her hand over her eyes and squinted against the afternoon sun to find the gap where her own cott had been. She took a deep breath. It would be a long walk to gather saplings and a hard chore to dig the mud by the riverbank. The corner timbers would be heavy to lift and hard to drag. “I have to start building,” she told Matt, who still held a bundle of twigs in his scratched, dirty arms. “Do you want to help? It could be fun if there were two of us.

“I can’t pay you, but I’ll tell you some new stories,” she added.

The boy shook his head. “I be whipped iffen I don’t finish the fire twiggies.” He turned away. After a hesitation, he turned back to Kira and said in a low voice, “I heared them talking. They don’t want you should stay. They be planning to turn you out, now your mum be dead. They be set on putting you in the Field for the beasts. They talk about having draggers take you.”

Kira felt her stomach tighten with fear. But she tried to keep her voice calm. She needed information from Matt and it would make him wary to know she was frightened. “Who’s ‘they’?” she asked in an annoyed, superior tone.

“Them women,” he replied. “I heared them talking at the well. I be picking up wood chippies from the refuse, and them didn’t even notice me listening. But they want your space. They want where your cott was. They aim to build a pen there, to keep the tykes and the fowls enclosed so they don’t be having to chase them all the time.”

Kira stared at him. It was terrifying, almost unbelievable, the casualness of the cruelty. In order to pen their disobedient toddlers and chickens, the women would turn her out of the village to be devoured by the beasts that waited in the woods to forage the Field.

“Whose was the strongest voice against me?” she asked after a moment.

Matt thought. He shifted the twigs in his hands, and Kira could see that he was reluctant to get involved in her problems and fearful of his own fate. But he had always been her friend. Finally, looking around first to be certain he wouldn’t be overheard, he told her the name of the person with whom Kira would have to do battle.

“Vandara,” he whispered.

It came as no surprise. Nonetheless, Kira’s heart sank.

Two

FIRST, KIRA DECIDED, it made sense to pretend she knew nothing. She would go back to the site of the cott where she had lived with her mother and begin to rebuild. Perhaps the simple fact of seeing her there at work would deter the women who hoped to drive her away.

Leaning on her stick, she made her way through the crowded village. Here and there, people acknowledged her presence with a curt nod; but they were busy, all of them at their daily work, and pleasantries were not part of their custom.

She saw her mother's brother. With his son, Dan, he was working in the garden beside the cott where he had lived with Solora and the tykes. Weeds had gone untended while his wife had neared her time, given birth, and died. Then more days had passed, more weeds had flourished, while he sat in the Field with his dead wife and infant. The poles that held beans entwined had toppled, and he was angrily setting them upright as Dan tried to help and the younger tyke, the girl named Mar, sat playing in the dirt at the edge. While Kira looked on, the man slapped his son hard on the shoulder, scolding him for not holding the pole straight.

She walked past them, planting her stick firmly in the ground with each step, planning to nod if they acknowledged her. But the small girl playing in the dirt only whimpered and spat; she had tried tasting some pebbles, in the way of toddlers, and had found herself with a mouthful of foul-tasting grit. The boy Dan glanced at Kira but made no sign of greeting or recognition; he was cringing from his father's slap. The man, her mother's only brother, didn't look up from his labor.

Kira sighed. At least he had help. Unless she could enlist her small friend, Matt, and some of his mates, she would have to do all of her work —rebuilding, gardening—herself, assuming she was allowed to stay.

Her stomach growled, and she realized how hungry she was. Rounding the path past a row of small cotts, she approached her own location and came upon the black heap of ashes that had been her home. There was nothing left of their household things. But she was pleased to see that the little garden remained. Her mother's flowers still bloomed, and the

summer-start vegetables were ripening in the sun. For now, at least, she would have some food.

Or would she? As she watched, a woman darted out of a clump of nearby trees, glanced at Kira, and then brazenly began to pull carrots from the garden that Kira and her mother had tended together.

“Stop it! Those are mine!” Kira moved forward as quickly as she could, dragging her deformed leg.

Laughing contemptuously, the woman sauntered away, her hands filled with dirt-encrusted carrots.

Kira hurried to the remains of the garden. She set her water container on the ground, pulled up some tubers, brushed the dirt away, and began to eat. Without a hunter as part of their family, she and her mother had not eaten meat except for the occasional small creature that they could catch within the boundaries of the village. They could not go to the woods to hunt, the way men did. Fish from the river were plentiful and easy to catch, and they felt no need of anything more.

But the vegetables were essential. She was fortunate, she realized, that the garden had not been entirely stripped during her four days in the Field.

Her hunger satisfied, she sat down to rest her leg. She looked around. On the edge of her space, near the ashes, a pile of saplings stripped of their branches was arranged, as if someone had been preparing to help her rebuild.

But Kira knew better. She rose and tentatively picked up one of the slender, pliable saplings from the pile.

Vandara emerged immediately from the nearby clearing where Kira realized she had been waiting and watching. Kira didn’t know where the woman lived or who her hubby or children might be. Her cott was none of those nearby. But she was very much known in the village. People whispered about her. She was known, and respected. Or feared.

The woman was tall and muscular, with long, tangled hair pulled back roughly and tied with a thong at the back of her neck. Her eyes were dark, and her direct look pierced any calmness that Kira might have felt. The ragged scar that marked her chin and continued down her neck to her broad shoulder was said to be a remnant of a long-ago battle with one of the forest creatures. No one else had ever survived such a clawing, and the scar reminded everyone of Vandara’s courage and vigor as well as her

malevolence. She had been attacked and clawed, the children whispered, when she tried to steal an infant creature from its mother's den.

Today, facing Kira, she was once again preparing to destroy someone's young.

Unlike the forest creature, Kira had no claws with which to fight. She gripped her wooden cane tightly and tried to stare back with no hint of fear.

"I've returned to rebuild my cott," she told Vandara.

"Your space is gone. It's mine now. Those saplings are mine."

"I will cut my own," Kira conceded. "But I will rebuild on this space. This was my father's space before I was born, and my mother's after he died. Now that she is dead, it's mine."

Other women emerged from surrounding cotts. "We need it," one called. "We're going to use the saplings to build a pen for the tykes. It was Vandara's idea."

Kira looked at the woman, who was holding the arm of a toddler roughly. "It might be a good idea," Kira replied, "if you want to pen your little ones. But not on this piece of ground. You can build a pen somewhere else."

She saw Vandara lean down and pick up a rock the size of a tyke's fist. "We don't want you here," the woman said. "You don't belong in the village anymore. You're worthless, with that leg. Your mother always protected you but she's gone now. You should go too. Why didn't you just stay in the Field?"

Kira saw that she was surrounded by hostile women who had come from their cotts and were watching Vandara for instructions and leadership. Several, she noticed, had rocks in their hands. If one rock were thrown, others would follow, she knew. They were all waiting for the first.

What would my mother have done? she thought frantically, and tried to call wisdom from the bit of her mother's spirit that lived on in her now.

Or my father, who never knew of my birth? His spirit is in me, too.

Kira straightened her shoulders and spoke. She held her voice steady and tried to meet the eyes of each woman in turn. Some lowered their gaze and looked at the ground. That was good. It meant they were weak.

"You know that in a village conflict that could bring death, we must go to the Council of Guardians," Kira reminded them. She heard some

murmurs of assent. Vandara's hand still gripped the rock, and her shoulders were tense, preparing to throw.

Kira looked directly at Vandara but she was speaking to the others now, in need of their support. She appealed not to their sympathy, because she knew they had none, but to their fear.

"Remember that if conflict is not taken to the Council of Guardians, and if there is a death . . ."

She heard a murmur. "If there is a death . . ." she heard a woman repeat in an uncertain, apprehensive voice.

Kira waited. She stood as tall and straight as she could.

Finally a woman in the group completed words of the rule. "The causer-of-death must die."

"Yes. The causer-of-death must die." Other voices repeated it. One by one they released the rocks. One by one each woman chose not to be a causer-of-death. Kira began to relax slightly. She waited. She watched.

Finally only Vandara still held her weapon. Glaring, Vandara menaced her, bending her elbow as if to throw. But at last she too dropped the rock on the ground, with a slight harmless toss toward Kira.

"I will take her to the Council of Guardians then," Vandara announced to the women. "I am willing to be her accuser. Let *them* cast her out." She laughed harshly. "No need for us to waste a life getting rid of her. By sunset tomorrow this ground can be ours and she will be gone. She will be in the Field, waiting for the beasts."

The women all glanced toward the forest, deep in shadows now: the place where the beasts waited. Kira forced herself not to follow their looks with her own eyes.

With the same hand that had held the rock, Vandara stroked the scar on her throat. She smiled cruelly. "I remember what it was like," she said, "to see your own blood pour upon the ground.

"I survived," she reminded them all. "I survived because of my strength.

"By night-start tomorrow, when she feels the claws at her throat," she went on, "this two-syllable mistake of a girl will wish she had died of sickness beside her mother."

Nodding in agreement, the women turned their backs on Kira and moved away, scolding and kicking at the small tykes by their sides. The sun was low in the sky now. They would attend to their evening tasks,

preparing for the return of the village men, who would need food and fire and the wrapping of wounds.

One woman was soon to give birth; perhaps that would happen tonight, and the others would attend her, muffling her cries and assessing the value of the infant. Others would be coupling tonight, creating new people, new hunters for the future of the village as the old ones died of wounds and illness and age.

Kira did not know what the Council of Guardians would decide. She knew only that whether she was to stay or go, to rebuild on her mother's piece of land or to enter the Field and face the creatures who were waiting in the forest, she would have to do it alone. Wearily she sat on the ash-blackened earth to wait for night.

She reached for a nearby piece of wood and turned it over in her hands, measuring its strength and its straightness. For a cott, should she be permitted to stay, she would need some sturdy lengths of solid wood. She would go to the woodcutter named Martin. He had been her mother's friend. She could barter with him, maybe offering to decorate a fabric for his wife, in exchange for the beams she would need.

For her future, for the work with which she thought she might earn her living, she would also need some small, straight pieces of wood. This one was too pliable and would not do, she realized, and dropped it on the ground. Tomorrow, if the Council of Guardians decided in her favor, she would look for the kind of wood she needed: short, smooth pieces she could fit together at the corners. She was already planning to build a new threading frame.

Kira had always had a clever way with her hands. When she was still a tyke, her mother had taught her to use a needle, to pull it through woven fabric and create a pattern with colored threads. But suddenly, recently, the skill had become more than simple cleverness. In one astounding burst of creativity, her ability had gone far beyond her mother's teaching. Now, without instruction or practice, without hesitancy, her fingers felt the way to twist and weave and stitch the special threads together to create designs rich and explosive with color. She did not understand how the knowledge had come to her. But it was there, in her fingertips, and now they trembled slightly with eagerness to start. If only she was allowed to stay.

Three

A MESSENGER, BORED AND scratching at an insect bite on his neck, came to Kira in the dawn and told her that she must report to the Council of Guardians at late morning. When the sun was approaching midday, she tidied herself and went, obedient to his instruction.

The Council Edifice was surprisingly splendid. It remained from before the Ruin, a time so far past that none of the people now living, none of their parents or grandparents, had been born. The people knew of the Ruin only from the Song that was presented at the yearly Gathering.

Rumor said that the Singer, whose only job in the village was the annual presentation of the Song, prepared his voice by resting for days and sipping certain oils. The Ruin Song was lengthy and exhausting. It began with the beginning of time, telling the entire story of the people over countless centuries. It was frightening too. The story of the past was filled with warfare and disasters. Most especially it was frightening when it recalled the Ruin, the end of the civilization of the ancestors. Verses told of smoky, poisonous fumes, of great fractures in the earth itself, of the way huge buildings toppled and were swept away by the seas. All of the people were required to listen each year, but sometimes mothers protectively covered the ears of their smallest tykes during the description of the Ruin.

Very little had survived the Ruin, but somehow the structure called the Council Edifice had remained standing and firm. It was immeasurably old. Several windows still contained patterned glass of deep reds and golds, amazing things, for knowledge of the way of making such remarkable glass had been lost. Some remaining windows, ones in which the colored glass had shattered, were now paned in a thick, ordinary glass that distorted the view through bubbles and ripples. Other windows were simply boarded over, and parts of the building's interior were darkly shadowed. Still, the Edifice was magnificent in comparison to the ordinary sheds and cottages of the village.

Kira, reporting near midday as she had been ordered by the messenger, walked alone down a long hallway lit on either side by sputtering flames from tall sconces fed with oil. She could hear the voices of the meeting ahead, behind a closed door: men's voices in muted arguing. Her stick

thumped on the wooden floor and the foot of her flawed leg brushed the boards with a sweeping sound, as if she dragged a broom.

"Take pride in your pain," her mother had always told her. "You are stronger than those who have none."

She remembered that now and tried to find the pride that her mother had taught her to feel. She straightened her thin shoulders and smoothed the folds of her coarsely woven shift. She had washed carefully in the clear stream water and had cleaned her nails with a sharp twig. She had combed her hair with the carved wooden comb that had been her mother's and which she had added to her own small storage sack after her mother's death. Then she had braided her hair, using her hands to interweave the thick dark strands deftly, tying the end of the heavy plait with a leather strip.

Steadying her apprehensions with a deep breath, Kira knocked on the heavy door to the room where the Council of Guardians' meeting was already in progress. It opened a crack, spilling a wedge of light into the dim hall. A man looked out and eyed her suspiciously. He widened the opening and gestured her inside.

"The accused orphan girl Kira is here!" the door guard announced, and the muttering subsided. In silence they all turned to watch her enter.

The chamber was huge. Kira had been there before, with her mother, on ceremonial occasions like the annual Gathering. Then, they had sat with the crowds on rows of benches, facing the stage that was furnished only with an altar table holding the Worship-object, the mysterious wooden construction of two sticks connected to form a cross. It was said to have had great power in the past, and the people always bowed briefly and humbly toward it in respect.

But now she was alone. There were no crowds, no ordinary citizens, only the Council of Guardians: twelve men who sat facing her across a long table at the foot of the stage. Rows of oil lamps made the room bright, and each of the men had his personal torch behind him, illuminating stacked and scattered papers that lay on the table. They watched her as she made her way hesitantly up the aisle.

Quickly, remembering the procedure that she had seen at every ceremony, Kira arranged her hands in a reverent position, cupped together, fingertips below her chin, as she arrived at the table and looked respectfully toward the Worship-object on the stage. The guardians nodded

approvingly. Apparently it had been the right gesture. She relaxed a bit, waiting, wondering what would happen next.

The door guard responded to a second knock and announced a second entry. “The accuser, Vandara!” he called.

So: it was to be the two of them. Kira watched as Vandara strode rapidly toward the table until they were side by side, facing the Council of Guardians. It gave her a small feeling of satisfaction to notice that Vandara’s feet were bare and her face dirty; the woman had made no special preparations. Perhaps none was necessary. But Kira felt that possibly she had gained a small bit of respect, a small advantage, with her cleanliness.

Vandara made the worshipful gesture with her hands. So they were even there. Then Vandara bowed, and Kira saw with a twinge of concern that the Guardians nodded their heads toward her.

I should have bowed. I must find an occasion to bow.

“We meet to pass judgment on a conflict.” The chief guardian, a white-haired man with a four-syllable name that Kira could never remember, spoke in an authoritative voice.

I had no conflict. I only wanted to rebuild my cott and live my life.

“Who is the accuser?” the white-haired man asked. Of course he knew the answer, Kira thought. But the question seemed to be ceremonial, part of the formal proceedings. It was answered by another of the guardians, a heavy-set man at the end of the table who had several thick books and a stack of papers in front of him. Kira eyed the volumes curiously. She had always yearned to read. But women were not allowed.

“Chief guardian, the accuser is the woman Vandara.”

“And the accused?”

“The accused is the orphan girl Kira.” The man glanced at the papers but didn’t seem to be reading anything.

Accused? What am I accused of? Hearing the repetition of the word, Kira felt a wave of panic. *But I can use it as a chance to bow and show humility.* She inclined her head and upper body slightly, acknowledging herself as the accused.

The white-haired man looked at the two of them dispassionately. Kira, leaning on her stick, tried to stand as straight as possible. She was almost as tall as her accuser. But Vandara was older, heavier, and unflawed except for the scar, the reminder that she had fought a beast and escaped alive.

Hideous though it was, the scar emphasized her strength. Kira's flaw carried no illustrious history, and she felt weak, inadequate, and doomed beside the disfigured, angry woman.

"The accuser will speak first," the chief guardian instructed.

Vandara's voice was firm and bitter. "The girl should have been taken to the Field when she was born and still nameless. It is the way."

"Go on," the chief guardian said.

"She was imperfect. And fatherless as well. She should not have been kept."

But I was strong. And my eyes were bright. My mother told me. She wouldn't let me go. Kira shifted her weight, resting her twisted leg, remembering the story of her birth, and wondering if she would have an opportunity to tell it here. *I gripped her thumb so tightly.*

"We have all tolerated her presence for these years," Vandara went on. "But she has not contributed. She cannot dig or plant or weed, or even tend the domestic beasts the way other girls her age do. She drags that dead leg around like a useless burden. She is slow, and she eats a lot."

The Council of Guardians was listening carefully. Kira's face felt warm with embarrassment. It was true, that she ate a lot. It was *all* true, what her accuser was saying.

I can try to eat less. I can go hungry. In her mind, Kira prepared her defense, but even as she did, she felt that it would be weak and whining.

"She was kept, against the rules, because her grandfather was still alive and had power. But he is long gone, replaced by a new leader with *more* power and wisdom—"

Vandara oozed compliments designed to strengthen her case, and Kira glanced at the chief guardian to see if he was swayed by the flattery. But his face was impassive.

"Her father was killed by beasts even before her birth. And now her mother is dead," Vandara went on. "There is even reason to think that her mother may have carried an illness that will endanger others—"

No! She was the only one to fall ill! Look at me! I lay beside her when she died, and I am not ill!

"—and the women need the space where their cott was. There is no room for this useless girl. She can't marry. No one wants a cripple. She takes up space, and food, and she causes problems with the discipline of

the tykes, telling them stories, teaching them games so that they make noise and disrupt the work—”

The chief guardian waved his hand. “Enough,” he announced.

Vandara frowned and fell silent. She bowed slightly.

The chief guardian looked around the table at the eleven others as if he sought comments or questions. One by one they nodded at him. No one said anything.

“Kira,” the white-haired chief guardian said, “as a two-syllable girl, you are not required to defend yourself.”

“Not defend myself? But—” Kira had planned to bow again, but forgot in her urgency. Now she remembered, but her bow was an awkward afterthought.

He waved his hand again, signaling her silence. She forced herself to be still and to listen.

“Because of your youth,” he explained, “you have a choice. You may defend yourself—”

She interrupted again, unable to stop. “Oh, yes! I want to def—”

He ignored her outburst. “Or we will appoint a defender on your behalf. One of us will defend you, using our greater wisdom and experience. Take a moment to think about this, because your life may depend upon it, Kira.”

But you are strangers to me! How can you tell the story of my birth? How can you describe my bright eyes, the strength of my hand as I gripped my mother’s thumb?

Kira stood helplessly, her future at stake. She felt the hostility beside her; Vandara’s breath was quick and angry though her voice had been silenced. She looked at the men seated around the table, trying to assess them as defenders. But she felt from them neither hostility nor much interest, just a sense of expectation as they waited for her decision.

As Kira agonized, her hands pushed their way into the deep pockets of her woven shift. She felt the familiar outline of her mother’s wooden comb and stroked it for comfort. With her thumb she felt a small square of decorated woven cloth. She had forgotten the strip of cloth in the recent confusing days; now she remembered how this one, this design, had come, unbidden to her hands as she sat beside her mother in the last days.

When she was much younger, the knowledge had come quite unexpectedly to her, and she recalled the look of amazement on her mother’s face as she watched Kira choose and pattern the threads one

afternoon with a sudden sureness. “I didn’t teach you that!” her mother said, laughing with delight and astonishment. “I wouldn’t know how!” Kira hadn’t known how either, not really. It had come about almost magically, as if the threads had spoken to her, or sung. After that first time, the knowledge had grown.

She clutched the cloth, remembering the sense of certainty it had given to her. She felt none of that sureness now. A speech of defense was not within her. She knew she would have to relinquish that role to one of these men, all strangers.

She looked at them with frightened eyes and saw one looking calmly, reassuringly back. She sensed his importance to her. She sensed something more: awareness, experience. Kira took a deep breath. The threaded cloth was warm and familiar in her hand. She trembled. But her voice was certain. “Please appoint a defender,” she said.

The chief guardian nodded. “Jamison,” he said firmly and nodded to the third man on his left.

The man with the calm, attentive eyes rose to defend Kira. She waited.

Four

SO THAT WAS his name: Jamison. It was not familiar to her. There were so many in the village, and the separation of male and female was so great, after childhood had ended.

Kira watched him stand. He was tall, with longish dark hair neatly combed and clasped at the back of his neck with a carved wooden ornament that she recognized as the work of the young woodcarver—what was his name? Thomas. That was it. Thomas the Carver, they called him. He was still a boy, no older than Kira herself, but already he had been singled out for his great gifts, and the carvings that came from his skilled hands were much in demand among the elite of the village. Ordinary people did not ornament themselves. Kira's mother had worn a pendant hanging from a thong around her neck but she kept it hidden, always, inside the neck of her dress.

Her defender picked up the stack of papers on the table before him; Kira had watched him marking these papers meticulously as he listened to the accuser. His hands were large, long-fingered, and sure in their movements; no hesitancy, no uncertainty. She saw that he wore a bracelet of braided leather on his right wrist, and that his arm, bare above the bracelet, was sinewy and muscular. He was not old. His name, Jamison, was still three syllables, and his hair had not grayed. She judged him to be midlife, perhaps the same age that her mother had been.

He looked down at the top paper of the stack in his hands. From where she stood, Kira could see the markings that he was examining. How she wished she could read!

Then he spoke. "I will address the accusations one by one," he said. Looking at the paper, he repeated the words that Vandara had said, though he did not imitate her rage-laden tone. "The girl should have been taken to the Field when she was born and still nameless. It is the way.' "

So that was what he had marked! He had written the words so that he could repeat them! Painful though it was to hear the accusations repeated, Kira realized with awe the value of the repetition. There would be no argument, afterward, about what had been said. How often among the

tykes fistfights and battles had begun from You said, I said, He said that you said, and the infinite variations.

Jamison set the papers on the table and picked up a heavy volume bound in green leather. Kira noticed that each of the guardians had an identical volume.

He opened to a page he had marked during the proceedings. Kira had seen him turning the pages of the volume as Vandara had made her accusatory presentation.

"The accuser is correct that it is the way," Jamison said to the guardians. Kira felt stricken by the betrayal. Hadn't he been appointed her defender?

He was pointing now to a page, to its densely written text. Kira saw some of the men turn in their green volumes, finding the same passage. Others simply nodded, as if they remembered it so clearly there was no need to reread.

She saw Vandara smile slightly.

Defeated, Kira felt again the small cloth square in her pocket. Its warmth was gone. Its comfort was gone.

"Turning, though," Jamison was saying, "to the third set of amendments __"

The guardians all turned pages in their books. Even those whose volumes had remained closed now picked them up and looked for the place.

"It is clear that exceptions can be made."

"Exceptions can be made," one of the guardians repeated, reading the words, his fingers moving on the page.

"So we may set aside the assertion that it is the way," Jamison announced with certainty. "It need not *always* be the way."

He is my defender. Perhaps he will find a way to let me live!

"Do you wish to speak?" the defender asked Kira.

Touching her scrap of cloth, she shook her head no.

He went on, consulting his notes. "She was imperfect. And fatherless as well. She should not have been kept." The second repetition hurt, because it was true. Kira's leg hurt too. She was not accustomed to standing so still for so long. She tried to shift her weight to ease the pressure on her flawed side.

"These accusations are true." Jamison repeated the obvious, in his steady voice. "The girl Kira was imperfect at birth. She had a visible and

incurable defect.”

The guardians were staring at her. So was Vandara, with contempt. Kira was accustomed to stares. She had been taunted throughout her childhood. With her mother as teacher and guide, she had learned to hold her head high. She did so now, looking her judges in the eyes.

“And fatherless as well,” Jamison continued.

In her memory, Kira could hear her mother’s voice explaining it to her. She was small then, and wondering why she had never had a father. “He did not return from the great hunt. It was before you were born,” her mother said gently. “He was taken by beasts.”

She heard Jamison repeat the words of her thoughts as if they had been audible. “Before her birth, her father was taken by beasts,” Jamison explained.

The chief guardian looked up from his papers. Turning to the others at the table, he interrupted Jamison. “Her father was Christopher. He was a fine hunter, one of the best. Some of you probably remember him.”

Several of the men nodded. Her defender nodded as well. “I was with the hunting party that day,” he said. “I saw him taken.”

You saw my father taken? Kira had never heard the details of the tragedy. She knew only what her mother had told her. But this man had known her father. This man had been there!

Was he afraid? Was my father afraid? It was a strange, unbidden question, and she did not ask it aloud. But Kira was so afraid herself. She could feel Vandara’s hatred as a presence by her side. She felt as if she were being taken by beasts; as if she were about to die. She wondered what the moment had been like for her father.

“The third amendment applies here, as well,” Jamison announced. “To the accusation ‘She should not have been kept,’ I reply that according to the third amendment, exceptions may be made.”

The chief guardian nodded. “Her father was a fine hunter,” he said again. The others at the table, taking their lead from him, murmured in agreement.

“Do you wish to speak?” they asked her. Again she shook her head. Again she felt, for the moment, spared.

“‘But she has not contributed,’” Jamison read next. “‘She cannot dig or plant or weed, or even tend the domestic beasts the way other girls her age do. She drags that dead leg around like a useless burden. She is slow,’” he

continued, and then Kira saw a hint of a smile as he concluded, "'and she eats a lot.'"

The man stood silent for a moment. Then he said, "As defender, I am going to concede some of these points. It is clear that she cannot dig or plant or weed or tend domestic beasts. I believe, however, that she has found a way to contribute. Am I correct, Kira, that you work at the weaving shed?"

Kira nodded, surprised. How did he know? Men paid no attention to the work of women.

"Yes," she said, her voice soft from nervousness. "I help there. Not with the actual weaving. But I clean up the scraps and help prepare the looms. It is work I can do with my hands and arms. And I am strong."

She wondered if she should mention her skill with the threads, her hope that perhaps she could use it as a way of making a living. But she couldn't think of a way to say it without sounding vain, so she kept still.

"Kira," he said, looking toward her, "demonstrate your flaw for the Council of Guardians. Let us see you walk. Go to the door and back."

It was cruel of him, she thought. They all knew about her twisted leg. Why did she have to do this in front of them, to submit to their humiliating stares? For a moment she was tempted to refuse, or at least to argue. But the stakes were too high. This was not a tykes' game, where arguing and fighting were expected. This was what would determine her future, or whether she had a future. Kira sighed and turned. She leaned on her stick and walked slowly to the door. Biting her lip, she dragged her aching leg step by step, and felt Vandara's contemptuous eyes on her back.

At the door Kira turned and came slowly back to her place. Pain started in her foot and seared through her twisted leg. She longed to sit.

"She does drag her leg, and she is slow," Jamison pointed out needlessly. "I concede those points.

"Yet her work at the weaving shed is competent. She goes each day for regular hours, and she is never late. The women there value her help.

"Does she eat a lot?" he asked, and chuckled. "I think not. Look how thin she is. Her weight refutes that accusation.

"But I suspect she is hungry now," he said. "I am. I suggest we take a break for a meal."

The chief guardian stood. "Do you wish to speak?" he asked Kira for the third time. For the third time she shook her head no. She felt terribly tired.

“You may sit,” he directed Kira and Vandara. “Food will be brought.”

Gratefully Kira lowered herself onto the nearby bench. She rubbed her throbbing leg with one hand. Across the aisle, she saw Vandara bow—*I forgot again! I should have bowed!*—and then sit, stony-faced.

The chief guardian glanced down at his own stack of papers. “There are five more charges,” he said. “We will deal with them and make a decision after the meal.”

Food appeared, brought by the door guard. A plate was handed to Kira. She saw and smelled roasted chicken and warm, crusty bread scattered with seeds. She had not eaten anything but raw vegetables in several days, and had not tasted chicken in many months. But she could still hear Vandara’s voice, shrill with vindictive accusation: “She eats a lot.”

Fearful of the consequences if she showed her ravenous hunger, Kira willed herself to nibble at the tempting meal. Then she set the half-empty plate aside and sipped water from the cup they had brought. Tired, hungry still, and frightened, she stroked the scrap of cloth in her pocket, and waited for the next round of accusations.

The twelve guardians went elsewhere, leaving through a side door, probably to a private eating place. After a while guards came to take her food tray away and announced a rest period. The trial would resume when the bell rang twice, they told her. Vandara rose and left the room. Kira waited for a moment. Then she made her way to the door of the Council Edifice, walked through the long hall, and went outside.

The world was unchanged. People came and went, working at various jobs, arguing loudly. She heard shrill voices at the marketplace: women shouting outrage at the prices, vendors shouting in reply. Babies cried, tykes fought, scavenger dogs growled and menaced each other as they vied for dropped scraps.

The boy Matt appeared, running past with some others. When he saw Kira he hesitated, then stopped and came back.

“We got saplings for you,” he whispered. “Me and some other tykes. We put ’em in a pile. Later we be starting your cott if you want.” Then he paused, curious. “If you need a cott, that is. What be happening in there?”

So Matt knew about the trial. No surprise. The boy seemed to know everything that was happening in the village. Kira shrugged with feigned

nonchalance. She didn't want to let him know how frightened she was. "A lot of talking," she told the boy.

"And she be in there? Her with the horrid scar?"

Kira knew whom he meant. "Yes. She's the accuser."

"She's hard, that Vandara. She killed her own tyke, they say. Made him eat the oleander, they say. Sat with him and held his head till he et it, though he didn't want to."

Kira had heard the story. "It was judged an accident," she reminded Matt, though she had her doubts. "Other tykes have eaten the oleander. It's a danger, having a poisonous plant grow wild everywhere. They ought to pull it all up, not leave it where the tykes can get at it."

Matt shook his head. "We be needing it there to teach us," he pointed out. "Me mum, she slapped at me when I touched it. Slapped my head around so horrid hard I thought my neck would crack. It's how I learnt about the oleander."

"Well, the Council of Guardians judged Vandara and said she didn't," Kira said again.

"She's a hard one, anyways. They say because of the horrid wound. Pain be making her cruel."

Pain made me proud, Kira thought but didn't say.

"When you be finish?"

"Later today."

"We'll work on your cott. Some of my mates'll help."

"Thank you, Matt," Kira said. "You're a good friend."

He made a face, embarrassed. "You be needing a cott." He turned to run after the other boys. "And you tell us the stories, after all. You be needing a place for that."

Kira smiled, watching him scamper off. The bell at the top of the Council Edifice rang twice. She turned to reenter the building.

"'She was kept, against the rules, because her grandfather was still alive and had power. But he is long gone.'"

Jamison read the next accusation on the list.

They had allowed her to sit for the afternoon session. And they told Vandara to sit too. Kira was grateful. If Vandara had stood, she would have forced herself to ignore the pain in her leg and stand as well.

Again the guardian who was her defender reiterated that exceptions could be made. By now, frightening though the accusations were, the repetition was tiresome. Kira tried to stay alert. With her hand in her pocket, she fingered the small scrap of woven cloth and pictured its colors in her mind.

The community cloth was drab, all no-color; the formless shifts and trousers worn by the people were woven and stitched for protection against the sudden occasional rain, thorn scratch, or poison berry. The usual village fabric was not decorated.

But Kira's mother had known the art of dye. It was from her stained hands that the colored threads used for rare ornamentation were produced. The robe worn each year by the Singer when he performed the Ruin Song was richly embroidered. The intricate scenes on it had been there for centuries, and the robe had been worn by each Singer and passed from one to the next. Once, many years before, Katrina had been asked to replace a few threads that had torn loose. Kira was only a small tyke then, but she remembered standing in the cott's shadowed corner when a guardian brought the fabulous robe and waited while her mother made the small repair. She remembered watching, fascinated, as her mother pushed a bone needle with thick colorful thread through the fabric; gradually a bright gold replaced the small frayed spot on one sleeve. Then they had taken the robe away again.

At that year's Gathering, Kira remembered, both she and her mother had peered from their seats at the stage, trying to find the repaired place as the Singer moved his arms in gestures during the Song. But they were too far away, and the repaired spot was too small.

Each year that followed, they had brought the ancient robe again to her mother for small repairs.

"One day my daughter will be able to do this," Katrina had said one year to the guardian. "Look what she has done!" she said and showed him the scrap that Kira had just completed, the one that had composed itself so magically in her fingers. "She has a skill far greater than mine."

Kira had stood silently, embarrassed but proud, as the guardian examined the threading she had done. He made no comment, simply nodded and returned the small piece to her. But his eyes had been bright with interest, she could see. Each year following, he had asked to see her work.

Kira always stood at her mother's side, never touching the fragile ancient cloth, marveling each time at the rich hues that told the history of the world. Golds and reds and browns. And here and there, faded pale, almost reduced to white, there had once been blue. Her mother showed her the faded places that remained of it.

Her mother did not know how to make blue. Sometimes they talked of it, Kira and Katrina, looking at the huge upturned bowl of sky above their world. "If only I could make blue," her mother said. "I've heard that somewhere there is a special plant." She looked out at her own garden, thick with the flowers and shoots from which she could create the golds and greens and pinks, and shook her head in yearning for the one color she could not create.

Now her mother was dead.

Now her mother is dead.

Kira startled herself out of the daydreamed memory. Someone was saying those words. She made herself listen.

"'—and now her mother is dead. There is even reason to think that her mother may have carried an illness that will endanger others—

"'—and the women need the space where their cott was. There is no room for this useless girl. She can't marry. No one wants a cripple. She takes up space, and food, and she causes problems with the discipline of the tykes, telling them stories, teaching them games so that they make noise and disrupt the work.'"

It dragged on. The repetitions of Vandara's accusations were recited, and the defender again and again reiterated the amendment that said exceptions could be made.

But Kira noted a change of tone. It was subtle, but she perceived a difference. Something had taken place among the Council of Guardians when the members had withdrawn during lunch. She saw Vandara shift uneasily in her seat and knew that her accuser noticed the difference too.

Kira, clutching the cloth talisman in her pocket, became aware suddenly that its warmth and comfort had returned.

During her infrequent leisure times, Kira often experimented with colored bits of threadings, feeling the excitement in her fingers as her surprising skill grew. She used bits of discarded woven cloth from the weaving shed. It was not a violation. She had asked permission to take the scraps to her cott.

Sometimes, pleased with what she had done, she showed her work to her mother and received a proud, quick smile of approval. But more often her efforts were disappointments, the uneven products of a girl still learning; usually she threw her experiments away.

This one, the one she held now in the nervous fingers of her right hand, she had done as her mother lay ill. Seated helplessly by the side of the dying woman, Kira leaned forward again and again to hold a container of water to her mother's lips. She smoothed her mother's hair, rubbed her cold feet, and held the trembling hands, knowing there was nothing more she could do. While her mother slept restlessly, Kira sorted the dyed threads in her basket and began to weave them into the cloth scrap with a bone needle. It soothed her to do so, and passed the time.

The threads began to sing to her. Not a song of words or tones, but a pulsing, a quivering in her hands as if they had life. For the first time, her fingers did not direct the threads, but followed where they led. She was able to close her eyes and simply feel the needle move through the fabric, pulled by the urgent, vibrating threads.

When her mother murmured, Kira leaned forward with the water container and moistened the dry lips. Only then did she look down at the small strip of material in her lap. It was radiant. Despite the dim light in the cott—it was night-start by then—the golds and reds pulsated as if the morning sun itself had slid and twisted its rays into the cloth. The brilliant threads crisscrossed in an intricate pattern of loops and knots that Kira had never seen before, that she could not have created, that she had never known or heard described.

When her mother's eyes opened for a final time, Kira had held the vibrant piece of fabric so that the dying woman could see. Words were beyond Katrina by then. But she smiled.

Now, secret in her hand, the cloth seemed to speak a silent, pulsing message to Kira. It told her there was danger still. But it told her also that she was to be saved.

Five

KIRA NOTICED FOR the first time that a large box had been placed on the floor behind the seats of the Council of Guardians.

It had not been there before the lunchtime break.

As she and Vandara watched, one of the guards, responding to a nod from the chief guardian, lifted the box to the table and raised its lid. Her defender, Jamison, removed and unfolded something that she recognized immediately.

"The Singer's robe!" Kira spoke aloud in delight.

"This has no relevance," Vandara muttered. But she too was leaning forward to see.

The magnificent robe was laid out on the table in display. Ordinarily it was seen only once a year, at the time when the village gathered to hear the Ruin Song, the lengthy history of their people. Most citizens, crowded into the auditorium for the occasion, saw the Singer's robe only from a distance; they shoved and pushed, trying to nudge closer for a look.

But Kira knew the robe well from watching her mother's meticulous work on it each year. A guardian had always stood nearby, attentive. Warned not to touch, Kira had watched, marveling at her mother's skill, at her ability to choose just the right shade.

There, on the left shoulder! Kira remembered that spot, where just last year some threads had pulled and torn and her mother had carefully coaxed the broken threads free. Then she had selected pale pinks, slightly darker roses, and other colors darkening to crimson, each hue only a hint deeper than the one before; and she had stitched them into place, blending them flawlessly into the edges of the elaborate design.

Jamison watched Kira as she remembered. Then he said, "Your mother had been teaching you the art."

Kira nodded. "Since I was small," she acknowledged aloud.

"Your mother was a skilled worker. Her dyes were steadfast. They have not faded."

"She was careful," Kira said, "and thorough."

"We are told that your skill is greater than hers."

So they knew. "I still have much to learn," Kira said.

“And she taught you the coloring, as well as the stitches?”

Kira nodded because she knew he expected her to. But it was not exactly true. Her mother had planned to teach her the art of the dyes, but the time had not yet come before the illness struck. She tried to be honest in her answer. “She was beginning to teach me,” Kira said. “She told me that she had been taught by a woman named Annabel.”

“Annabella now,” Jamison said.

Kira was startled. “She is still alive? And four syllables?”

“She is very old. Her sight is somewhat diminished. But she can still be used as a resource.”

Resource for what? But Kira stayed silent. The scrap in her pocket was warm against her hand.

Suddenly Vandara stood. “I request that these proceedings continue,” she said abruptly and harshly. “This is a delaying tactic on the part of the defender.”

The chief guardian rose. Around him, the other guardians, who had been murmuring among themselves, fell silent.

His voice, directed at Vandara, was not unkind. “You may go,” he said. “The proceedings are complete. We have reached our decision.”

Vandara stood silent, unmoving. She glared at him defiantly. The chief guardian nodded, and two guards moved forward to escort her from the room.

“I have a right to know your decision!” Vandara shouted, her face twisted with rage. She wrested her arms free of the guards’ grasp and faced the Council of Guardians.

“Actually,” the chief guardian said in a calm voice, “you have no rights at all. But I am going to tell you the decision so that there will be no misunderstanding.

“The orphan girl Kira will stay. She will have a new role.”

He gestured toward the Singer’s robe, still spread out on the table. “Kira,” he said, looking at her, “you will continue your mother’s work. You will go beyond her work, actually, since your skill is far greater than hers was. First, you will repair the robe, as your mother always did. Next, you will restore it. Then your true work will begin. You will *complete* the robe.” He gestured toward the large undecorated expanse of fabric across the shoulders. He raised one eyebrow, looking at her as if he were asking a question.

Nervously Kira nodded in reply and bowed slightly.

"As for you?" The chief guardian looked again at Vandara, who stood sullenly between the guards. He spoke politely to her. "You have not lost. You demanded the girl's land, and you may have it, you and the other women. Build your pen. It would be wise to pen your tykes; they are troublesome and should be better contained.

"Go now," he commanded.

Vandara turned. Her face was a mask of fury. She shrugged away the hands of the guards, leaned forward, and whispered harshly to Kira, "You will fail. Then they will kill you."

She smiled coldly at Jamison. "So, that's it, then," she said. "The girl is yours." She stalked down the aisle and went through the broad door.

The chief guardian and the other Council members ignored the outburst, as if it were merely an annoying insect that had finally been swatted away. Someone was refolding the Singer's robe.

"Kira," Jamison said, "go and gather what you need. Whatever you want to bring with you. Be back here when the bell rings four times. And we will take you to your quarters, to the place where you will live from now on."

Puzzled, Kira waited a moment. But there were no other instructions. The guardians were straightening their papers and collecting their books and belongings. They seemed to have forgotten she was there. Finally she stood, straightened herself against her walking stick, and limped from the room.

Emerging from the Council Edifice into bright sunlight and the usual chaos of the village central plaza, she realized that it was still midafternoon, still an ordinary day in the existence of the people, and that no one's life had changed except her own.

The summer-start day was hot. Near the Edifice steps, a crowd had gathered to watch a pig-slaughter behind the butcher's. After the choice parts were sold, scraps would be thrown. People and dogs together would shove and grab. The smell from the thick mounds of excrement beneath the terrified pigs and the high-pitched squeals of terror as they awaited death made Kira feel dizzy and nauseated. She hurried around the edge of the throng, making her way toward the weaving shed.

"You're out! What happened? Do you go to the Field? To the beasts?"

Matt was calling to her in excitement. Kira smiled. His curiosity appealed to her—it matched her own—and behind his wildness he had a kind heart, she thought. She remembered how he had acquired his pet, his little companion dog. It had been a useless stray, underfoot, scavenging everywhere for food. On a rainy afternoon it had been caught and tossed by the wheel of a passing donkey cart. Badly injured, the dog lay bleeding in the mud and would have been left to die unnoticed. But the boy hid it in nearby shrubbery until its wounds had mended. Kira had watched from the weaving shed each day as Matt stealthily crept in to feed the animal while it lay healing. Now the dog, lively and in good health despite a tail as crooked and useless as Kira's leg, stayed constantly at Matt's side. He called it Branch, named for the small tree part he had used to splint its damaged tail.

Kira reached down and scratched the homely mongrel behind his ear. "I'm let go," she told the boy.

His eyes widened. Then he grinned. "So we still be getting stories, me and my mates," he said with satisfaction.

"I seen Vandara," Matt added. "She come out like this." He scampered to the steps of the Edifice and stalked down them, face haughty. Kira smiled at the imitation.

"She be hating you now for certain," Matt added cheerfully.

"Well, they gave her my piece of land," Kira told him, "so she and the others can make a pen for their tykes, the way they wanted.

"I hope you didn't already start on a new cott for me," she added, remembering that he had offered.

Matt grinned. "We didn't start yet," he said. "Soon we would've. But if you be sent to the beasts, then there be no need."

He paused, rubbing Branch with his dirty bare foot. "Where you to live, then?"

Kira slapped at a mosquito on her arm. She rubbed at the little smear of blood from its bite. "I don't know," she admitted. "They told me to come back to the Edifice when the bell rings four. I'm to gather my things." She laughed a little. "I don't have much to gather. My things were mostly burned."

Matt grinned. "I saved you some things," he told her happily. "I filched 'em from your cott before the burning. Didn't tell you before. I waited to see what be happening to you."

Down the path, beyond the pig-slaughter, Matt's mates called to him to hurry and join them. "Me and Branch must go along now," he said, "but I be bringing the things to you when the bells go four. To the steps, aye?"

"Thank you, Matt. I'll meet you at the steps." Smiling, Kira watched him go, his thin, scabbed legs churning in the dusty path as he ran to join his friends. Beside him, Branch scampered, his broken stub of a tail wagging crookedly.

Kira continued on through the crowds, past the food shops and the noise of bickering, bargaining women. Dogs barked; a pair of them snarled, facing each other with bared teeth in the path, a dropped morsel between them. Nearby, a curly-headed tyke eyed both dogs warily then deftly leaped between them, seized the bit of food, and stuffed it into his own mouth. His mother, intent on her business at a nearby shop, glanced around, saw the tyke near the dogs, and seized him away, yanking at his arm and administering a sharp slap to his head when he was back at her side. The tyke smirked, chewing eagerly at whatever he had picked up from the path.

The weaving shed was farther along, mercifully in a shady area surrounded by large trees. It was quieter there and cooler, though the mosquitoes were more numerous. The women in the shed, seated at looms, nodded to Kira as she approached. "There's plenty scraps to gather," one called and gestured with her head as her hands continued work.

It was the job that Kira usually did, the tidying up. She was not permitted to weave yet, though she had always watched carefully how it was done and thought that she could have, if they needed her.

She had not been at the weaving shed in many days, not since her mother's illness and death. So much had happened. So much had changed. She assumed that she would not be returning now that her status seemed different. But because they had called to her in a friendly way, Kira moved through the shed, through the clatter of the wooden looms at work, and picked up the scraps from the floor. One loom was silent, she noticed. No one was working there today. Fourth from the end, she counted. Usually Camilla was there.

She paused by the empty loom and waited until a nearby worker had stopped to reset her shuttle.

"Where is Camilla?" Kira asked curiously. Sometimes, of course, the women left briefly, to wed, to give birth, or simply assigned to some other

temporary task.

The weaver glanced over, her hands still occupied. Her feet began to move again on the treadle. “She fell, took a clumsy fall, over at the stream.” She gestured with her head. “Doing washing. The rocks were mossy.”

“Yes, it’s slippery there.” Kira knew. She had slipped herself sometimes at the stream, at the washing place.

The woman shrugged. “She broke her arm real bad. Can’t be fixed. Can’t be made straight. No more good for weaving. Her hubby tried real hard to straighten up the arm ’cause he needs her. For the tykes and such. But she’ll probably go to the Field.”

Kira shuddered, imagining the torturing pain of the broken arm as the hubby tried to pull it into a healing shape.

“She has five tykes, Camilla does. Now she can’t care for them, or work. They’ll be given away. You want one?” The woman grinned at Kira. She had few teeth.

Kira shook her head. She smiled wanly and continued down the aisle between the looms.

“You want her loom?” the woman called after her. “They’ll be needing somebody to take it. You’re probably ready to weave.”

But Kira shook her head again. She had wanted to weave, once. The weaving women had always been kind to her. But her future seemed different now.

The looms clattered on. From the shade of the shed, Kira noticed that the sun was lower in the sky. It would soon be the ringing of four bells. She nodded goodbye to the weaving women and headed back along the path toward the place where she had lived with her mother, the place where her cott had long stood, the place of the only home she had ever known. She felt a need to say goodbye.

Six

THE HUGE BELL in the tower of the Council Edifice began to ring. The bell governed the people's lives. It told them when to begin work and when to stop, when to gather for meetings, when to prepare for a hunt, celebrate an event, or arm for danger. Four bells—the third was resonating now—meant that the day's business could end. For Kira, it meant the time to report to the Council of Guardians. She hurried toward the central plaza through the crowds of people leaving their workplaces.

Matt was waiting on the steps as he had promised. Branch, beside him, was pawing excitedly at a large iridescent beetle, blocking its path again and again with a paw as the beetle tried unsuccessfully to waddle by. The dog looked up and wagged its crooked tail when Kira called a greeting.

"What you got?" Matt asked, looking at the small bundle Kira carried on her back.

"Not much." She laughed ruefully. "But I had stored a few things in the clearing so they missed the burning. My basket of threads, and some scraps of cloth. And look at this, Matt." She reached into her pocket and held up a lumpy oblong. "I found my soap where I left it on a rock. Good thing, because I don't know how to make it, and I have no coins to buy any."

Then she laughed, realizing that Matt, grimy and unkempt, felt no need of soap. She supposed Matt had a mother somewhere, and usually mothers scrubbed their tykes now and then, but she had never known Matt clean.

"Here, I brung these." Matt indicated a pile of objects wrapped haphazardly in a dirty woven cloth on the step near him. "Some things I took before the burning, for you to have iffen they let you stay."

"Thank you, Matt." Kira wondered what he had chosen to rescue.

"But you'll not be carrying it because of your horrid gimp," he said, referring to her crippled leg. "So I'll be your carrier, once they tells you where you're to be. That way I'll know too."

Kira liked the idea of Matt coming with her and knowing where she would live. It made everything seem less strange. "Wait here, then," she told him. "I must go inside, and they'll show me where I'll be living. Then

I'll come back for you. I have to hurry, Matt, because the bells have finished, and they told me to come at four bells."

"Me and Branch can wait. I've got me a sucker I filched from a shop," Matt said, pulling a dirt-encrusted candy from his pocket, "and Branch, him always loves a mammoth buggie to poke, like now." The dog's ears shot up at the sound of his name but his eyes never left the beetle on the step.

Kira hurried inside the Council Edifice while the boy waited on the steps.

Only Jamison was in the large room waiting for her. She wondered if having been appointed her defender at the trial, he was now to be her overseer. Oddly she felt a little twinge of irritation. She was old enough to manage alone. Many girls her age were preparing for marriage. She had always known she would not marry—her twisted leg made it an impossibility; she could never be a good wife, could never perform the many duties required—but certainly she could manage alone. Her mother had, and had taught her.

But he nodded in welcome and her brief irritation faded and was forgotten.

"There you are," Jamison said. He rose and folded the papers he'd been reading. "I'll show you to your quarters. It isn't far. It's in a wing of this building."

Then he looked at her and at the small bundle she carried on her back. "Is that all you have?" he asked.

She was glad that he had inquired because it gave her the opportunity to mention Matt.

"Not quite," Kira told him. "But I can't carry much because of—" She gestured toward her leg. Jamison nodded.

"So I have a boy who helps me. His name is Matt. I hope you don't mind, but he's waiting on the steps. He has my other things. I was hoping that maybe you would let him continue as my helper. He's a good boy."

Jamison frowned slightly. Then he turned and called to one of the guards. "Get the boy from the steps," he said.

"Ah," Kira interrupted. Both Jamison and the guard turned. She felt awkward and spoke apologetically. She even felt herself bow slightly. "He has a dog," she said in a low voice. "He won't go anyplace without his dog.

“It’s quite small,” she added in a whisper.

Jamison looked at her impatiently, as if he were suddenly aware what a burden she was going to be. Finally he sighed. “Bring the dog too,” he told the guard.

The three of them were led down a corridor. They were an odd trio, with Kira first, stumbling against her stick, dragging her leg with its broom sound: swish, swish; then Matt, silent for a change, his eyes wide, taking in the grandeur of the surroundings; and finally, toenails tip-tapping against the tiled floor, the bent-tailed dog, happily carrying a squirming beetle in his mouth.

Matt put the bundle of Kira’s belongings down on the floor just inside the doorway, but he wouldn’t step inside the room. He took in everything solemnly with his wide-eyed, observant gaze and made the decision himself.

“Me and Branch, we’ll wait out here,” he announced. “What this be called?” he asked, looking around the wide space where he stood.

“The corridor,” Jamison told him.

Matt nodded. “Me and Branch, we just be waiting here in this corridor then. Me and Branch, we don’t go in the room because of the wee buggies.”

Kira looked over quickly, but the beetle had been consumed now. Anyway, the beetle had not been wee. Matt himself had described it as mammoth.

“Wee buggies?” Jamison was the one who inquired, his brow furrowed.

“Branch got fleas,” Matt explained, looking at the floor.

Jamison shook his head. Kira saw his lips twitch in amusement. He led her into the room.

She was astonished. The cott where she had lived all of her life with her mother had been a simple dirt-floored hut. Their beds had been straw-filled pallets on raised wooden shelves. Handmade utensils had held their belongings and food; they had always eaten together at a wooden table that Kira’s father had made long before her birth. She mourned the table after the burning because of the memories it held for her mother. Katrina had described his strong hands smoothing the wood and rounding its corners so

that the coming baby would not be endangered by sharp edges. All of it was ashes now: the smooth wood, the soft edges, the memory of his hands.

This room had several tables, skillfully made, carved and delicate. And the bed was wood, on legs, covered with lightly woven bed coverings. Kira had never seen such a bed and supposed the raised legs were to make one safe from beasts or bugs. Yet surely there were none here, in the Council Edifice; even Matt had sensed that and consigned his dog's fleas to the corridor. There were windows, with glass, and through them she could see the tops of trees; the room faced the forest behind the building.

Jamison opened a door inside the room, and Kira saw a smaller room, windowless, lined with wide drawers.

"The Singer's robe is kept here," he told her. He opened one large drawer slightly and she saw the folded robe with its bright threaded colors. He closed it again and gestured toward the other, smaller drawers.

"Supplies," he said. "Whatever you need."

He moved back into the bedroom and opened a door on the other side. She caught a glimpse of what at first seemed flat stones; it was a floor of pale green tile. "There is water here," he explained, "for washing and all your needs."

Water? Inside a building?

Jamison went to the doorway and glanced out to where Matt and Branch waited. Matt was squatting on the floor and sucking on his stick of candy.

"If you want the boy to stay with you, you could wash him here. The dog too. There is a tub."

Matt heard him and looked up toward Kira in dismay. "No. Me and Branch, we be going now," he said. Then with an expression of concern, he asked, "You don't be captive here, do you?"

"No, she's not a captive," Jamison reassured Matt. "Why would you think that?

"Your supper will be brought," he told Kira. "You're not alone here. The Carver lives down the hall, on the other side." He gestured with his hand to a closed door.

"The Carver? Do you mean the boy named Thomas?" Kira was startled. "He lives here too?"

"Yes. You are welcome to visit his room. You must both work during the daylight hours, but you may take your meals with the Carver. Familiarize

yourself with your quarters now, and your tools. Get some rest. Tomorrow I will go over your work assignment with you.

"I'll lead the boy and the dog out now."

She stood in the open doorway and watched them retreat down the long corridor, the man leading the way, Matt walking jauntily just behind him, and the dog at Matt's heels. The boy looked back at her, waved slightly, and grinned with a questioning look. His face, smeared with the sticky candy, was alight with excitement. She knew that within minutes he would be telling his mates that he'd barely escaped being washed. His dog too, and all the fleas; a close call.

Quietly she closed the door and looked around.

Kira found it hard to sleep. So much was strange.

Only the moon was familiar. Tonight it was almost full, flooding her new living space with silvery light through the glass of her windows. On such a night back in her other life, in the windowless cott with her mother, she might have risen to enjoy the moonlight. On some moonlit nights she and her mother slipped outside and stood together in the breeze, slapping at mosquitoes and watching the clouds slide past the bright globe in the night sky.

Here, through a slightly opened window, night breeze and moonlight entered her room together. The moonlight slipped over the table in the corner and washed across the polished wooden floor. She saw her sandals paired beside the chair where she had sat to remove them. She saw her walking stick leaning in the corner, its shadow outlined on the wall.

She saw the shapes of the objects on the table, the things that Matt had brought, bundled, to her. She wondered how he had chosen. Perhaps it had been rushed, with the fire starting; perhaps he had simply grabbed what he could with his impetuous, generous small hands.

There was her threading frame. She thanked Matt in her mind. He had known what the frame meant to her.

Dried herbs in a small basket. Kira was glad to have those and hoped she could remember which was to be used for what. Not that the herbs had been of any value to her mother when the terrible sickness came; but for the small things, an ache in the shoulder, a bite that festered and swelled, the herbs were helpful then. And she was happy to have the basket. She remembered her mother weaving it from river grass.

Some chunky tubers. Kira smiled, picturing Matt grabbing food, probably nibbling while he was at it. She would not need those now. The meal brought to her on a tray in the evening had been hearty: thick bread and a soup made of meat and barley with greens throughout, and flavored strongly with herbs she savored but didn't recognize. She had eaten it from a glazed earthen bowl, using a spoon carved from bone, and then wiped her mouth and hands with a folded fine-woven cloth.

No meal had ever been so elegant for Kira. Or so lonely.

In the little arrangement of things were folded pieces of her mother's clothing: a thick shawl with a fringe at the edge, and a skirt, stained from the dyes her mother used, so that the simple, unadorned fabric seemed decorated with streaks of color. Sleepily thinking of her mother's stained skirt, Kira imagined how she could use her threads to outline the bright streaks of color so that with skill—and time; it would take time—she could re-create it into a costume suitable for some celebration.

Not that there had ever been anything for her to celebrate. But maybe this—her new quarters, her new job, the fact that her life had been spared.

Kira tossed restlessly on the bed. She felt an object at her neck. It too had been in the bundle that Matt brought, and she treasured it most of the things he had saved. It was the pendant that her mother had always worn dangling from a leather thong, not visible under her clothing. Kira knew of it, had touched and stroked it often as a small tyke still breastfed. It was a shiny section of rock, split cleanly down one side but studded with shiny purple on the other and with a hole to allow for the thong. A simple but unusual thing, it had been a gift from Kira's father, and Katrina had cherished it as a kind of talisman. Kira had lifted it from her mother's neck when she was ill in order to wash the fevered body, and had placed it on the shelf near the basket of herbs. Matt must have found it there.

Wearing it now around her own neck, Kira lifted it against her cheek, hoping to recapture a feeling of her mother, perhaps the smell of her: herbs and dyes and dried blossoms. But the little rock was inert and odorless, without a hint or memory of life.

In contrast, the scrap of cloth from Kira's pocket, the one which had created itself so magically in her fingers, fluttered where it lay near her head. Perhaps the night breeze through the open window had made it move. For a moment Kira, watching the moonlight and thinking of her mother, didn't notice. Then she saw the cloth tremble slightly, as if it had

life, in the pale light. She smiled and the thought crossed her mind that it was like Matt's little dog, looking up, twitching its ears, wagging its woeful tail, hoping to be noticed.

She reached out and touched the cloth. Feeling its warmth in her hand, Kira closed her eyes.

A cloud shadowed the moon, and the room darkened. Finally, she slept, without dreams; and in the morning when Kira woke the little cloth was limp, no more than a wrinkled scrap of pretty fabric in her bed.

Seven

AN EGG! THAT was a treat. In addition to the boiled egg, her breakfast tray contained more of the thick bread and a bowl of warm cereal swimming in cream. Kira yawned and ate.

Usually at waking she and her mother had walked to the stream. Here, she supposed, the green-tiled room took its place. But Kira was nervous about the room. She had entered it the night before and turned the various gleaming handles. Some of the water was hot and startled her. It must be for cooking. Somewhere below, a fire had apparently been built. Somehow the cooking water had been hoisted here, but what was she to do with it? There was no need for her to cook, Kira thought this morning as she had last night. Warm prepared food had been brought.

Mystified still, Kira turned her attention this morning to the long, low tub. Jamison had suggested that she could wash Matt there. There was something that looked and smelled like soap. Leaning forward over the tub's rim, she tried to wash but the procedure was awkward and unnatural; it was easier in the stream. And she could wash her clothes in the stream and hang them on the bushes. Here in this small, windowless room there was no place to dry anything. No breeze. No sun.

It was interesting, Kira decided, that they had found a way for water to enter the building, but impractical and unsanitary, and there was no place to bury waste. She wiped the cold water from her face and hands with the cloth she found in the tiled room and decided that she would return to the stream each day to attend to her needs properly.

She dressed quickly, laced her sandals, pulled the wooden comb through her long hair, grabbed her stick, and hurried through the empty corridor to leave her new home and go for a morning walk. But before she had gone very far, a door in the corridor opened. A boy she recognized emerged and spoke to her.

"Kira the Threader," he said. "They told me you had come."

"You're the Carver," she said. "Jamison told me you were here."

"Yes, I'm Thomas." He grinned at her. He seemed about her age, not long into two syllables, and was a good-looking boy with clear skin and

bright eyes. His hair was thick and reddish-brown. A chip in one front tooth showed when he smiled.

"This is where I live," he explained. He opened the door wider so that she could see inside. His room was just like hers, though on this, the opposite side of the corridor, his window view was to the wide central square. She noticed too that his room seemed more of a lived-in place. His things were strewn around.

"This is my workroom too." He gestured, and she could see a large table with his carving tools and scraps of wood. "And there's a storage room, for supplies." He pointed.

"Yes, mine's the same," Kira told him. "My supply room has lots of drawers. I haven't started work yet, but there's a table under the windows, and the light is good there. I think that's where I'll do the threading.

"And there—that door? That's your cooking water and your tub?" Kira asked him. "Do you use it? It seems such a bother, when the stream's so nearby."

"The tenders will show you how it works," he explained.

"Tenders?"

"The one who brought your food? That's a tender. They'll help you however you want. And a guardian will be checking on you every day."

Good. Thomas seemed to know how things worked. It would be a help, Kira thought, because it all seemed so new, so foreign. "Have you lived here a long time?" she asked politely.

"Yes," he replied. "Since I was quite young."

"How did it happen that you came here?"

The boy frowned, thinking back. "I had just begun carving. I was a very little tyke, but somehow I had discovered that if I took a sharp tool and a piece of wood, I could make pictures.

"Everyone thought it was quite amazing." He laughed. "I guess it was."

Kira laughed a little too, but she was remembering herself, very small, finding that her fingers had a kind of magic to them when she held the colored threads, seeing her mother's astonishment and the look on the face of the Guardian. It must have been the same, she thought, for this boy.

"Somehow the Guardians heard about my work. They came to our cott and admired it."

So similar, Kira thought.

“Then,” Thomas continued, “not long after, my parents were both killed during a storm. Struck by lightning, both at once.”

Kira was shocked. She had heard of *trees* felled by lightning. But not people. The people didn’t go out during thunderstorms. “Were you there? How did you stay safe?”

“No, I was alone at the cott. My parents were doing an errand of some sort. I remember that a messenger had been sent for them. But then some guardians came and got me and told me of their deaths. It was fortunate that they knew of me and felt that my work was of value, even though I was still small. Otherwise, I would have simply been given away. But instead, they brought me here.

“I’ve been here ever since.” He gestured around the room. “For a long time I practiced, and learned. And I’ve made ornaments for many of the guardians. Now, though, I do real work. Important work.” He pointed, and she could see that a long piece of wood was resting against the table, leaning in the same way that she leaned her walking stick. But this stick was intricately decorated, and from the shavings on the table she could tell that the boy had been working on it.

“They’ve given me wonderful tools,” Thomas told her.

Outside, the bell rang. Kira was disconcerted. Back in the cott, the sound of the bell meant that it was time to go to work. “Should I go back to my quarters?” she asked. “I was going to walk to the stream.”

Thomas shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. You can do whatever you want. There are no real rules. Only that you are required to do the work you were brought here for. They’ll check on your work every day.

“I’m going out now to visit my mother’s sister. She has a new tyke. A girl. Look! I’m taking a toy.” He reached into his pocket and showed Kira an intricately carved bird. It was hollow; he held it to his mouth and made it whistle. “I made it yesterday,” he explained. “It took time from my regular work, but not much. It was easy to do.

“I’ll be back for lunch,” he added, “because I have work to do this afternoon. Shall I bring my lunch tray to your quarters so that we can eat together?”

Kira agreed happily.

“And look,” he said, “here comes the tender who’ll pick up the morning trays. She’s very nice. You ask her—No, wait. I’ll ask her.”

While Kira watched curiously, Thomas approached the tender and spoke briefly to her. She nodded.

"You follow her back to your quarters, Kira," Thomas said. "You don't need to go to the stream. She'll explain the bathroom to you. See you at lunch!" He put the little carved bird into his pocket, closed the door to his room, and headed down the corridor. Kira followed the tender back the way she had come.

Jamison came to her room shortly after lunch. Thomas had eaten and hurried away to his quarters to resume work. Kira had just gone into the small room lined with drawers and slid open the one containing the Singer's robe. She had not yet unfolded it. She had never been permitted to touch it before and was in awe now and a little nervous. She was staring down at the lavishly decorated fabric, remembering her mother's deft hands holding the bone needle, when she heard the knock on her door and then heard Jamison come in.

"Ah," he said. "The robe."

"I was thinking that I must soon begin my duties," Kira told him, "but I'm almost afraid to start. This is so new to me."

He lifted the robe from the drawer and carried it to the table by the window. There in the light the colors were even more magnificent and Kira felt even more inadequate.

"Are you comfortable here? You slept well? They brought your food? It was good?"

So many questions. Kira considered whether to tell him how restlessly she had slept and decided against it. She glanced at the bed to see if the bed coverings would reveal her tossing and noticed for the first time that someone, probably the tender who brought and took away the food, had smoothed everything so that there was no sign that the bed had been used at all.

"Yes," she told Jamison. "Thank you. And I met Thomas the Carver. He ate his lunch with me. It was nice to have someone to talk to.

"And the tender explained things I needed to know," she added. "I thought the hot water was for cooking. I never used hot water just for washing before."

He wasn't paying attention to her embarrassed explanation about the bathroom. He was looking carefully at the robe, sliding his hand across the

fabric. “Your mother made minor repairs each year. But now it must all be restored. This is your job.”

Kira nodded. “I understand,” she said, though she didn’t, not really.

“This is the entire story of our world. We must keep it intact. *More* than intact.” She saw that his hand had moved and was stroking the wide unadorned section of fabric, the section of the cloth that fell across the Singer’s shoulders. “The future will be told here,” he said. “Our world depends upon the telling.

“Your supplies? They are adequate? There is much to be done here.”

Supplies? Kira remembered that she had brought a basket of her own threads. Looking now at the magnificent robe, she knew that her sparse collection, a few leftover colored threads that her mother had allowed her to use for her own, was not adequate at all. Even if she had the skill—and she was not at all certain that she did—she could never restore the robe with what she had brought. Then she remembered the drawers that she had not yet opened.

“I haven’t looked yet,” she confessed. She went to the shallow drawers that he had pointed out to her yesterday. They were filled with rolled white threads in many different widths and textures. There were needles of all sizes and cutting tools laid neatly in a row.

Kira’s heart sank. She had hoped that perhaps the threads would already be dyed. Glancing back at the robe on the table, at its wide array of hues, she felt overwhelmed. If only her mother’s threads had been saved! But they were gone, all burned.

She bit her lip and looked nervously at Jamison. “They’re not colored,” she murmured.

“You said your mother had been teaching you to dye,” he reminded her.

Kira nodded. She *had* implied that, but it had not been completely true. Her mother had *planned* to teach her. “I still have much to learn,” she confessed. “I learn quickly,” she added, hoping that it didn’t sound vain.

Jamison looked at her with a slight frown. “I will send you to Annabella,” he told her. “She is far in the woods, but the path is safe, and she can finish the teaching that your mother started.

“The Ruin Song is not until autumn-start,” he pointed out. “That’s still several months away. The Singer won’t need the robe until then. You’ll have plenty of time.”

Kira nodded uncertainly. Jamison had been her defender. Now it seemed he was her adviser. Kira was grateful for his help. Still, she sensed an edge, an urgency, to his voice that had not been there before.

When he left her room, after pointing out a cord on the wall that she could pull if she needed anything, Kira looked again at the robe displayed on the table. So many colors! So many shades of each color! Despite his reassurance, autumn-start was not that far away.

Today, Kira decided, she would examine the robe and plan. Tomorrow, first thing, she would find Annabella and plead for help.

Eight

MATT WANTED to come.

"You be needing me and Branch for protectors," he said. "Them woods is full of fierce creatures."

Kira laughed. "Protectors? You?"

"Me and Branchie, us is tough," Matt said. He flexed what passed for muscles in his scrawny arms. "I only *look* wee."

"Jamison said it was safe as long as we stay on the path," Kira reminded the boy. Secretly, she thought it would be fun to have both of them, boy and dog, for company.

"But suppose you was to get lost," Matt said. "Me and Branch can find our way out of anywheres. You be needing us for certain iffen you get lost."

"But I'll be gone all day. You'll get hungry."

Triumphantly Matt pulled a thick wad of bread from the voluminous pocket of his baggy shorts. "Filched this crustie from the baker," he announced with pride.

So the boy won, to Kira's delight, and she had company for the journey into the forest.

It was about an hour's walk. Jamison was correct; there seemed to be no danger. Although thick trees shaded the path and they could hear rustling in the undergrowth and unfamiliar cries of strange forest birds, nothing seemed threatening. Now and then Branch chased a small rodent or nosed about an opening in the earth, frightening whatever small animal made its home there.

"Probably there be snakies all in here," Matt told her with a mischievous smile.

"I'm not afraid of snakes."

"Most girls be."

"Not me. There were always small snakes in my mother's garden. She said they were friends to the plants. They ate bugs."

"Like Branchie. Look, he catched him one now." Matt pointed. His dog had pounced upon an unlucky creature with long thin legs. "That be called

a daddy longlegs."

"Daddy longlegs?" Kira laughed. She'd not heard the name before. "Do you have a father?" she asked the boy curiously.

"Nah. Did onct. But now, me mum is all I got."

"What happened to your father?"

He shrugged. "Dunno.

"In the Fen," he added, "things is different. Many gots no pa. And them that gots them, they be scairt of them, 'cause they hit something horrid.

"Me mum hits too," he added, with a sigh.

"I had a father. He was a fine hunter," Kira told him proudly. "Even Jamison said so. But my father was taken by beasts," she explained.

"Aye, I heared that." She could see that Matt was trying to look sad for her benefit, but it was difficult for a boy whose temperament was so merry. Already he was pointing at a butterfly, gleeful at the bright spotted orange of its wings in the dim forest light.

"See this? You brought it with my mother's things, remember?" She lifted the rock pendant from the neck of her shift.

Matt nodded. "It be all purply. And shiny-like."

Kira dropped it back gently inside her clothing. "My father made it as a gift for my mother."

Matt wrinkled his face, thinking that over. "Gift?" he asked.

Kira was startled that he didn't understand. "When you care about someone and give them something special. Something that they treasure. That's a gift."

Matt laughed. "In the Fen, they don't have that," he said. "In the Fen, iffen they give you something special, it be a kick in your buttie.

"But that's a pretty thing you got," he added politely. "You be lucky I saved it."

It was a long journey for Kira, dragging her twisted leg. Her stick caught at roots knotted under the earth of the path, and she stumbled from time to time. But she was accustomed to the awkwardness and the ache. They had always been with her.

Matt had run ahead with Branch, and they returned to her, excited, announcing that the destination was just around the next curve.

"A wee cott it is!" he called. "And there's the crone outside in the garden, with her crookedy hands full of rainbow!"

Kira hurried along, rounded the curve, and understood what he meant. In front of the tiny hut, a bent and white-haired old woman was working near a lush flower garden. She leaned toward a basket on the ground, lifted handfuls of bright-colored yarns—yellow of various shades, from the palest lemon to a deep tawny gold—and hung them across a rope that was strung from one tree to another. Deeper shades of rust and red were already hanging there.

The woman's hands were gnarled and stained. She lifted one in greeting. She had few teeth and her skin was folded into wrinkles, but her eyes were unclouded. She walked nearer to them, gripping a cane made of wood and seeming unsurprised by the sudden visitors. She peered intently at Kira's face. "You liken your mum," she said.

"You know who I am?" Kira asked, puzzled. The old woman nodded.

"My mother has died."

"Aye. I knowed it."

How? How did you know? But Kira didn't ask.

"I'm called Kira. This is my friend. His name is Matt."

Matt stepped forward, suddenly a little shy. "I brung my own crustie," he said. "Me and my doggie, we be no trouble to you."

"Sit," the woman named Annabella said to Kira, ignoring Matt and Branch, who was busily sniffing the garden, looking for the right place to lift his stubby leg. "Doubtless you be weary and pained." She gestured toward a low flattened tree stump, and Kira sank down gratefully, rubbing her aching leg. She unlaced her sandals and emptied them of pebbles.

"You must learn the dyes," the old woman said. "You come for that, aye? Your mum did, and she was to teach you."

"There wasn't time." Kira sighed. "And now they want me to know it all, and do the work—the repairing of the Singer's Robe? You know about that?"

Annabella nodded. She returned to the drying-rope and finished hanging the yellow strands. "I can give you some threads," she said, "to start the repair. But you must learn the dyes. There are other things they'll want of you."

Kira thought again of the untouched expanse across the back and shoulders of the robe. It was what they would want of her, to fill that space with future.

“You must come here each day. You must learn all the plants. Look—” The woman gestured at the garden plot, thick with thriving plants, many in summer-start bloom.

“Bedstraw,” she said, pointing to a tall plant massed with golden blossoms. “The roots give good red. Madder’s better for reds, though. There’s my madder over behind.” She pointed again, and Kira saw a sprawling, weedy plant in a raised bed. “’Tis the wrong time to take the madder roots now. Fall-start’s better, when it lies dormant.”

Bedstraw. Madder. I must remember these. I must know these.

“Dyer’s greenweed,” the woman announced, poking with her cane at a shrub with small flowers. “Use the shoots for a fine yellow. Don’t move it, though, lessen you must. Greenweed don’t want to transplant.”

Greenweed. For yellow.

Kira followed the woman as she rounded a corner of the garden. Annabella stopped and poked at a clumped plant with stiff stems and small oval leaves. “Here’s a tough fellow,” she said, almost affectionately. “Saint Johnswort, he’s called. No blooms yet; it’s too early for him. But when he blooms, you can get a lovely brown from his blossoms. Stain your hands though.” She held her own up and cackled with laughter.

Then: “You’ll be needing greens. Chamomile can give you that. Water it good. But take just the leaves for your green color. Save the blossoms for tea.”

Kira’s head was already spinning with the effort to remember the names of the plants and the colors they would create, and only a small corner of the lavish garden had been described. Now at the sound of the word water and also tea she realized that she was thirsty.

“Please, do you have a well? Might I have a drink?” she asked.

“And Branchie too? He been looking for a stream but found nought.” Matt’s voice piped beside Kira; she had almost forgotten that he was there.

Annabella led them to her well behind the cott, and they drank gratefully. Matt poured water into the crevice of a curved rock for his dog, who lapped eagerly and waited for more.

Finally they sat together in the shade, Kira and the old woman, Annabella. Matt, gnawing his bread, wandered off with Branch at his heels.

“You must come each day,” Annabella repeated. “You must learn all the plants, all the colors. As your mum did when she was a girl.”

“I will. I promise.”

“She said you had the knowledge in your fingers. More than she did.”

Kira looked at her hands, folded in her lap. “Something happens when I work with the threads. They seem to know things on their own, and my fingers simply follow.”

Annabella nodded. “That be the knowledge. I got it for the colors but never for the threads. My hands was always too coarse.” She held them up, stained and misshapen. “But to use the knowledge of the threading, you must learn the making of the shades. When to sadden with the iron pot. How to bloom the colors. How to bleed.”

To sadden. To bloom. To bleed. What a strange set of words.

“And the mordants too. You must learn those. Sometimes sumac. Tree galls are good. Some lichens.

“Best is—here, come; let me show you. See you make a guess to its birthplace, this mordant.” With surprising agility for a woman of four-syllable age, Annabella rose and led Kira to a covered container near the place where a large kettle of dark water, too huge for cooking food, hung above the smoldering remains of an outdoor fire.

Kira leaned forward to see, but when Annabella lifted the lid, she jerked her head back in unpleasant surprise. The smell of the liquid was terrible. Annabella laughed, a delighted cackle.

“Got you a guess?”

Kira shook her head. She couldn’t imagine what was in the foul-smelling container or what its origin might be.

Annabella replaced the lid, still laughing. “You save it and age it good,” she said. “Then it brings the hue to life and sets it firm.

“It’s old piss!” she explained with a satisfied chuckle.

Late in the day, Kira set out for home with Matt and Branch. The bag she carried over her shoulder was filled with colored threads and yarns that Annabella had given to her.

“These’ll do for you now,” the old dyer had said. “But you must learn to make your own. Say back to me now, those you keep in mind.”

Kira closed her eyes, thought, and said them aloud. “Madder for red. Bedstraw for red too, just the roots. Tops of tansy for yellow, and greenwood for yellow too. And yarrow: yellow and gold. Dark hollyhocks, just the petals, for mauve.”

“*Snotweed,*” Matt said loudly with a grin and wiped his own runny nose on his dirty sleeve.

“Hush, you,” Kira said to him, laughing. “Don’t play foolish now. It’s important I remember.

“Broom sedge,” she added, still remembering. “Goldy yellows and browns. And Saint Johnswort for browns too, but it’ll stain my hands.

“And bronze fennel—leaves and flowers; use them fresh—and you can eat it too. Chamomile for tea and for green hues.

“That’s all I remember now,” Kira said apologetically. There had been so many others.

Annabella nodded in approval. “It’s a starting,” she said.

“Matt and I must go or it will become dark before we’re back,” Kira said, turning. Looking at the sky to assess the time, she suddenly remembered something.

“Can you make blue?” she asked.

But Annabella frowned. “You need the woad,” she said. “Gather fresh leaves from first year’s growth of woad. And soft rainwater; that makes the blue.” She shook her head. “I have nought. Others do, but they be far away.”

“Who be others?” Matt asked.

The old woman didn’t answer the boy. She pointed toward the far edge of her garden, where the woods began and there seemed to be a narrow overgrown path. Then she turned toward her hut. Kira heard her speak in a low voice. “I ne’er could make it,” she was saying. “But some have blue yonder.”

Nine

THE SINGER'S ROBE contained only a few tiny spots of ancient blue, faded almost to white. After her supper, after the oil lamps had been lit, Kira examined it carefully. She lay her threads—the ones from her own small collection and the many others that Annabella had given to her—on the large table, knowing she would have to match the hues carefully in daylight before she began the repairs. It was then that she noticed—with relief because she would not know how to repair it; and with disappointment because the color of sky would have been such a beautiful addition to the pattern—that there was no real blue any more, only a hint that there once had been.

She said the names of the plants over and over aloud, trying to make a chant of them for easier memory. "Hollyhock and tansy; madder and bedstraw . . ." But they fell into no comfortable rhythm and did not rhyme.

Thomas knocked at her door. Kira greeted him happily, showed him the robe and threads, and told him of her day with the old dyer.

"I can't remember all the names," she said in frustration. "But I'm thinking that if in the morning I go back to where my old cott was, maybe my mother's garden plants, the ones she used for colors, will still be there. And then, seeing them, the names will mean more. I only hope Vandara—"

She paused. She had not told the carver about her enemy, and even saying the name made her apprehensive.

"The woman with the scar?" Thomas asked.

Kira nodded. "Do you know her?"

He shook his head. "But I know who she is," he said. "Everyone does."

He picked up a little skein of the deep crimson. "How did the dyer make this?" he asked curiously.

Kira thought. *Madder for red.* "Madder," she recalled. "Just the roots."

"Madder," he repeated. Then an idea occurred to him. "I could write the names for you, Kira," he suggested. "It would make the remembering easier."

"You can write? And read?"

Thomas nodded. "I learned when I was young. Boys can, the ones who are chosen. And some of the carving I do has words."

“But I can’t. So even if you were to write the names, I couldn’t read them. And it’s not permitted for girls to learn.”

“Still, I could help you in the remembering. If you told them to me and I wrote them, then I could read them to you. I know it would help.”

She realized he was probably right. So he brought pen and ink and paper from his quarters, and once again she said the words, those she could recall. In the flickering light, she watched as he carefully wrote them down. She saw how the curves and lines in combinations made the sounds, and that he was then able to say them back to her.

When he read the word *hollyhock* aloud with his finger on the word, she saw that it was long, with many lines like tall stems. She turned her eyes away quickly so that she would not learn it, would not be guilty of something clearly forbidden to her. But it made her smile, to see it, to see how the pen formed the shapes and the shapes told a story of a name.

Very early in the morning Kira ate quickly and then walked to the place where her mother’s color garden had been. Few people were up and about yet, at sunrise. She half expected to encounter Matt and Branch, but the paths were mostly empty and the village was still quiet. Here and there a tyke cried and she could hear the soft clucking of chickens. But the noisy clangor of daytime life was yet to come.

Approaching, she could see the pen that was already partly built. It had been only a few days, but the women had gathered thorn bushes and circled them around the remains of the cott where Kira had grown up. The encircled ground was still ashes and rubble. Very soon the thorned fence they were building would enclose the area completely; she supposed they would create some kind of gate, and then they would shove their chickens and their tykes inside. There would be sharp wood pieces and jagged fragments of broken pots. Kira sighed, seeing it. The tykes would be scratched and splintered by scraps of her own destroyed past, but there was nothing she could do. She edged quickly past the wreckage and the half-built fence, and found the remains of her mother’s color garden at the edge of the woods.

The vegetable garden was completely stripped, but the flower plot remained though its plants were trampled. Clearly the women, dragging their bushes to build the pen, had simply walked across the area; yet the

blossoms continued to bloom and she was awed to see that vibrant life still struggled to thrive despite such destruction.

She named them to herself, those she remembered, and picked what she could, filling the cloth she had brought. Annabella had told her that most of the flowers and leaves could be dried and used later. Some, like bronze fennel, should not. “Use it fresh,” Annabella had said of the fennel. You could eat it too. Kira left it where it grew and wondered if the women would know that it could be harvested for food.

A dog barked nearby and now she could hear arguing: a hubby shouting at his wife, a tyke being slapped. The village was waking to its routine. It was time for her to go. This was not her place any more.

Kira gathered the cloth around the plants she had collected and tied the edges together. Then she slung it over her shoulder, picked up her walking stick, and hurried away. On a back path, avoiding the central lane of the village, Kira saw Vandara and averted her eyes. The woman called her name in a smug, taunting voice. “Liking your new life?” she called, and followed the question with a harsh laugh. Quickly Kira turned a corner to escape a confrontation, but the memory of the sarcastic question and the woman’s smirk accompanied her home.

“I’ll need a place to grow a color garden,” she told Jamison hesitantly a few days later, “and an airy place for drying the plants. Also a place where a fire can be built, and pots for the dyeing.” She thought some more then added, “And water.”

He nodded and said that such things could be provided.

He came each evening to her quarters to assess her work and to ask her needs. It seemed strange to Kira that she could make requests and to have them answered.

But Thomas said it had always been so for him, too. The kinds of wood —ash, heartwood, walnut, or curly maple—each had been brought when he asked. And they had given him tools of all sorts, some he had not known of before.

The days, busy ones, tiring ones, began to pass.

One morning as Kira prepared to go to the dyer’s hut, Thomas came to her room.

“Did you hear anything last night?” he asked her uncertainly. “Maybe a sound that woke you?”

Kira thought. “No,” she told him. “I slept soundly. Why?”

He seemed puzzled, as if he were trying to remember something. “I thought I heard something, a sound like a child crying. I thought it woke me. But maybe it was a dream. Yes, I guess it was a dream.”

He brightened and shrugged off the little mystery. “I’ve made something for you,” he told her. “I’ve been doing it in the early mornings,” he explained, “before I started my regular work.”

“What is your usual work, Thomas?” Kira asked. “Mine’s the robe, of course. But what have they set you to do?”

“The Singer’s staff. It’s very old, and his hands—and the hands of other Singers in the past, I suppose—have worn the carvings down so it must all be recarved. It’s difficult work. But important. The Singer uses the carvings of the staff to find his place, to remind him of the sections in *the Song*. And there’s a large place at the top that has never been carved. Eventually I’ll be doing that, carving it for the first time, making my own designs.” He laughed. “Not my own, really. They’ll tell me what to put there.

“Here.” Shyly, Thomas reached into his pocket and handed her the gift. He had made her a small box with a tight fitting lid, its top and sides intricately carved in the pattern of the plants she was beginning to learn and to know. She examined it with delight. She recognized the tall spikes of yarrow and its dense clustered blossoms; around them twined the flopping stems of coreopsis, above a carved base of that plant’s mounded dark and feathery leaves.

She knew instantly what she wanted to place in the exquisite box. The small scrap of decorated cloth that she had carried in her pocket on the day of the trial and that comforted her loneliness when she held it before sleeping, was hidden away in one of the drawers that contained supplies. She no longer carried it with her because she feared losing it during her long walks through the woods and her long days hard at work with the dyer.

Now, with Thomas watching, she fetched the scrap and laid it in the box.

“It’s a lovely thing,” he said, seeing the small cloth.

Kira stroked it before she closed the lid. “It speaks to me somehow,” she told him. “It seems almost to have life.” She smiled, embarrassed, because she knew it was an odd thing and that he would not understand and could perhaps find her foolish.

But Thomas nodded. “Yes,” he said to her surprise. “I have a piece of wood that does the same. One I carved long ago, when I was just a tyke.

“And sometimes I feel it in my fingers still, the knowledge that I had then.”

He turned to leave.

That you had then? No more? The knowledge doesn’t stay? Kira was dismayed at the thought but she said nothing to her friend.

Though there was still so much information she needed to acquire from Annabella, Kira was forced to make her learning time at the dyer’s cott shorter because it was important to begin to work on the Singer’s robe and she needed the daylight. She was glad now of the tiled bathroom that had caused her such confusion at first. The warm water and soap helped to rid her hands of stains, and it was vital that her hands be clean when she touched the robe.

She still had her small frame, the one that Matt had saved from the fire, but there was no need of it. Among the supplies provided for her was a fine new frame that unfolded and stood on sturdy wooden legs so that it was not necessary to hold it in her lap. She placed the frame by the window so she could sit in a chair beside it while she worked.

She spread out the robe on the large table to examine it carefully and select the place where she should begin her work. Now, for the first time, Kira began to perceive the vastness from which the Singer created his song. The entire history of the people, culminating with the horrifying story of the Ruin, was portrayed with immense complexity on the voluminous folds of the robe.

Kira could see pale green sea, and in its depths fish of all kinds, some larger than men, larger than ten men together. Then the sea blended imperceptibly into sweeping areas of land populated only by the figures of animal life unknown to her, hulking creatures grazing on tall tan grasses. All of this was only one small corner of the Singer’s robe. As her eyes moved along, she saw that out of the pale sea, near the grazing land, rose other land, and on this land appeared men. The tiny stitches created figures of hunters with spears and weaponry, and she saw that little knots of red *(madder for red. Just the roots)* had been used to color blood on the figures of fallen men, those taken by beasts.

She thought of her father. But this scene was long ago, long before her father, long before any of their people. The lifeless men dotted with the red knots of blood were still an infinitesimal section of the robe, a blink of an eye, forgotten now except for the once-a-year Song, the time that the Singer reminded them of the past.

Looking at the robe, and smoothing it with her washed hand, Kira sighed and realized that she did not have time for such study. There was important work to be done, and she had noticed Jamison's increasing sense of urgency. Again and again he came to her room, checking, making certain that she was attentive to her job and would be meticulous in the work.

Identifying a place on one sleeve that badly needed repair, Kira moved that section of the robe into the frame, which held it taut. Then, carefully, using the delicate cutting tools she had been given, Kira snipped away the frayed threads. There was a small stain across an intricately threaded flower in shades of gold, part of a landscape that portrayed rows of tall sunflowers near a pale green stream. Someone long ago—someone skilled in the art—had made the stream appear to flow by stitching white curving lines that gave a sense of foam. How gifted the earlier threader had been! But those stained threads would need to be replaced.

The work was painstakingly slow. Her mother, though her fingers had not had the almost-magical knowledge that Kira's had, would have been more experienced, more deft, and faster.

She held the new gold threads to the window and examined the subtle shifts in hue, choosing just the right ones for the repair.

When the late afternoon light began to dim, Kira stopped work. She looked at the few inches in the frame, assessing what she had accomplished, and decided that she was doing well. Her mother would have been pleased. Jamison would be pleased. She hoped that when the time came to don the Robe, the Singer would be satisfied as well.

But her fingers ached. Kira rubbed them and sighed. This was not at all the same as her own threadings, the small pieces she had done throughout her childhood. It was certainly not like the special one that had begun to move of its own volition in her hand beside her mother's deathbed, to twist and mix the threads in ways she had never learned, to form patterns she had never seen. Her hands had never tired then.

Thinking of that special scrap, Kira went to the carved box, unfolded the bit of cloth, and put it in her pocket. It felt familiar and welcome there, as if a friend had come to visit.

It was almost time for her evening meal to be brought. Kira covered the spread-out robe with a plain cloth to protect it. Then she went along the corridor and knocked on Thomas's door.

The young carver was also just finishing his work. When he called "Come in!" Kira entered and saw that he was wiping the blades of his tools and putting them away. The long staff lay across his worktable, held in a clamp. He smiled when he saw her. They had begun to eat their evening meal together each night.

"Listen," Thomas said, and pointed to his windows. She could hear noise coming from the central plaza below. Her own room, facing the forest, was always quiet.

"What's happening?"

"Take a look. They're preparing for a hunt tomorrow."

Kira moved to the window and looked down. Below, the men were gathering for the distribution of weapons. Hunts always began early in the morning; the men left the village before sunrise. But this was preparation. Kira could see that doors had been opened in an outbuilding beside the Council Edifice, and from the storage place long spears were being brought and placed in piles in the center of the plaza.

Men were lifting the spears, testing the weight, looking for the one that felt right. There were arguments. She saw two men with their hands grasping the same spearshaft, each determined to hold on. They were yelling at each other.

In the midst of the noisy chaos, Kira saw a small figure dart in among the men and grab a spear. No one else seemed to notice. They were all absorbed with themselves, shoving and pushing. She saw that one man was already bloodied from a spear point, and it was clear that others would be injured before the disorganized distribution was complete. No one paid any attention to the boy. From her place in the window, Kira watched as the figure, holding an undisputed spear, moved triumphantly to the side of the crowd. A dog scampered by his bare feet.

"It's Matt!" Kira cried in dismay. "He's just a tyke, Thomas! He's much too young for a hunt!" When Thomas came to the window, she pointed. He

followed her finger and finally saw Matt where he stood to the side with his spear.

Thomas chuckled. “Sometimes boy tykes do that,” he explained. “The men don’t care. They let them follow along on the hunt.”

“But it’s too dangerous for a tyke, Thomas!”

“What do you care?” Thomas seemed genuinely curious. “They’re only tykes. There are too many of them anyway.”

“He’s my friend!”

He seemed to comprehend then. She saw his face change. He looked down toward the boy with concern. Kira could see that now Matt was encircled by the pack of mischief-makers who were often at his side. They were admiring him as he brandished the spear.

Kira felt a startling sensation—a throbbing in her hip. She reached for it, intending to rub it away, thinking that perhaps she had leaned too hard against the windowsill. Then her hand went instinctively to her pocket. She remembered that she had placed the scrap of cloth there. She touched the fabric and felt tension, danger, and a warning from it.

“Please, Thomas,” Kira said urgently, “Help me stop him!”

Ten

IT WAS DIFFICULT to get through the crowd. Kira followed Thomas, who was taller than she, as he pushed to make a path through the shouting, raucous men. She recognized some: the butcher was there, cursing as he argued with another man, and she could see her mother's brother too, in a group comparing the weights of their weapons with loud bragging comments.

Kira had not been much in the world of men. They led very separate lives from those of women. She had never envied them. Now, as she found herself jostled by their thick, sweat-smelling bodies, as she heard their muttered angry comments and their shouts, she found herself both frightened and annoyed. But she realized that this was hunt behavior, a time for flaunting and boasting, a time for testing each other. No wonder Matt, with his childish swagger, wanted to be part of it.

A light-haired man with blood smeared on his arm turned from a shoving match and grabbed at her as she hurried by. "Here's a trophy!" she heard him call out. But his companions were preoccupied with their argument. Using her walking stick as a prod, she pushed the man away and wrenched her wrist free from his grasp.

"You shouldn't be here," Thomas whispered when she caught up with him. They had almost reached the side of the square where they had last spotted Matt. "It's always only men. And at hunt time they act brutish."

Kira knew that. She could tell from the smell, the coarse quarreling, and the noise that it was not a place for girls or women, and she kept her head lowered and her eyes on the ground, hoping not to be noticed and grabbed again.

"There's Branch!" She pointed at the little dog, who recognized her and wagged his crooked stub of a tail. "Matt will be nearby!"

With Thomas beside her, she pushed her way through and found him, still prancing with his spear. Its sharp point was dangerously close to the other tykes.

"Matt!" she called in a scolding voice.

He saw her, waved, and grinned. "I'm Mattie now!" he called.

Exasperated, Kira grabbed the spear shaft just above his hand. "You won't be two syllables for a long time, Matt," she said. "Thomas, take

this.” She removed the spear from Matt’s grasp and handed it carefully to the Carver.

“Yes, I be!” Matt said, laughing and proud. “Looky here! I’ve got me a manly pelt!”

The little boy raised both arms above his head to show her his joke. Kira looked. His underarms were thick with some kind of growth. “What is that?” she asked him. Then she wrinkled her nose. “It smells terrible!” She touched it, pulled some away, and began to laugh. “Matt, that’s swamp grass. It’s awful stuff. What do you mean, plastering yourself with it?” She could see that he’d smeared it on his chest as well.

Thomas handed the spear to a man who grabbed it eagerly. He looked down at Matt, who was wiggling under Kira’s hands on his shoulders. “You look like a beast-boy! What do you say, Kira? I think it’s time we showed Matt the bathroom! Shall we clean him up and wash his second syllable away?”

At the word *wash* Matt wiggled harder, trying to get free. But Thomas and Kira both held him and finally he allowed Thomas to pick him up and carry him on his shoulders, towering over the crowd.

Now that the dangerous fascination of the spear was gone, Matt’s group of young admirers dispersed. Kira could hear Matt calling from his perch above the noisy, shoving men, “Looky here at the beast-boy!” No one looked, or cared. She found Branch underfoot and picked him up to keep him safe from so many trampling feet. Carrying the dog tucked under her free arm, Kira leaned on her stick and followed Thomas; they edged their way around the crowd and back into the quiet of the building’s corridors.

Kira listened, laughing, to the wails and whimpers as Thomas mercilessly scrubbed both Matt and Branch in his bathroom tub. “Not me hairs too!” Matt howled in protest as Thomas poured water over his tangled mop of hair. “You’re drownding me!”

Finally, with Matt pink-faced and subdued, his washed hair toweled into a halo and his clean body wrapped in a blanket, they shared their meal. Branch shook himself briskly as if he had just played in the stream, then settled himself on the floor and nibbled at scraps they handed to him.

Matt sniffed warily at his own hand and grimaced. “That soapie’s horrid awful,” he said. “But I like the food,” he added and filled his plate again.

After dinner Kira brushed his hair while he complained loudly. Then she held a mirror for him. Mirrors had been new to her too when she came here to live, and they gave an image different from the stream reflection that had been all she had known of herself. Matt examined his own image with interest, wrinkling his nose and raising his eyebrows. He showed his teeth, growled at the mirror, and startled Branch, who was sleeping under the table. “I be so fierce,” Matt announced smugly. “You would’ve drownded me but I fought so fierce.”

Finally they redressed him in his raggedy clothing. He looked down at himself. Then he reached suddenly for the leather thong around Kira’s neck.

“Gimme,” he said.

She pulled back, annoyed. “Don’t, Matt,” she told him and pulled her necklace loose from his hand. “Don’t grab. If you want something, you should ask.”

“Gimme is an ask,” he pointed out, puzzled.

“No, it isn’t. You should learn some manners. Anyway,” Kira added, “you can’t have it. I told you it was special.”

“A gift,” Matt said.

“Yes. A gift from my father to my mother.”

“So she’d like him best.”

Kira laughed. “Maybe so. But she already liked him best.”

“I want a gift. I never be having one.”

Laughing, Thomas and Kira gave him the smooth bar of soap, which he tucked solemnly into his pocket. Then they turned him loose. By now the men and the spears were gone. They watched from the window as the small figure followed by his dog crossed the deserted plaza and disappeared into the night.

Alone with Thomas, Kira tried to explain the warning that had come to her from the cloth. “It creates a feeling in my hand,” she explained hesitantly. “Look.” She took it from her pocket and held it toward the light. But it was still now. She could feel a kind of comfort and silence from it, nothing like the tension that had stirred it earlier. But she felt disappointed that it now seemed no more than a scrap of cloth; she wanted Thomas to understand.

She sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It seems lifeless, I know. But there are times—”

Thomas nodded. “Perhaps the feeling is for you alone,” he said. “Here, I’ll show you my bit of wood.” He went to a shelf above the table where he kept his tools and took down a piece of light-colored pine small enough to fit into the palm of his hand. Kira could see that it was intricately decorated with carved designs that interwove around it in complicated curves.

“You carved this when you were just a tyke?” she asked him in surprise. She had never seen anything so extraordinary. The boxes and ornaments that were on his worktable, beautiful in their own way, were much simpler than this small piece.

Thomas shook his head. “I began to,” he explained. “I was learning to use the tools. I began to try them on this small chunk of wood that had been discarded. And it—”

He hesitated. He stared at the piece of wood as if it mystified him still.

“It carved itself?” Kira asked.

“It did. It seemed to, at least.”

“It was the same for me with the cloth.”

“It’s why I understand the way the cloth speaks to you. The wood speaks in the same way. I can feel it in my hand. Sometimes it—”

“Warns you?” Kira asked, remembering how the cloth had seemed to tense and tremble when she saw Matt holding the spear.

Thomas nodded. “And calms me,” he added. “When I came here so young, sometimes I was very lonely and frightened. But the feel of the wood was calming.”

“Yes, the cloth is soothing at times too. I was fearful here at first, the same as you, when everything was so new. But when I held the scrap, I felt reassured.” She thought for a moment, trying to picture what this life in the Edifice must have been like for Thomas, brought here very young.

“I think it’s easier for me because I’m not alone, as you were,” she told him. “Jamison comes every day to look at my work. And I have you just down the corridor.”

The two friends sat silently for a moment. Then Kira replaced the cloth in her pocket and rose from her chair. “I must go to my room,” she said. “There’s so much to do.

“Thank you for helping me with Matt,” she added. “He’s a naughty tyke, isn’t he?”

Thomas, returning his carved piece to the shelf, agreed with a grin. “Horrid naughty,” he said and they laughed together with affection for their little friend.

Eleven

KIRA, TREMBLING, HURRIED into the clearing where Annabella's small house stood.

She was alone this morning. Matt still accompanied her occasionally, but he was bored by the old dyer and her endless instructions. More often he and his dog were off with his friends, dreaming up adventures. Matt was still annoyed about the bath. His mates had laughed at him when they saw him clean.

So this morning Kira made her own way down the forest path. This morning, for the first time, she had been frightened.

"What's wrong?" Annabella was at the outdoor fire. She must have risen before dawn to have the fire so hot by now. It crackled and spat under the huge iron kettle. Yet the sun had barely risen when Kira set out.

Catching her breath, Kira limped past the gardens to where the old woman stood sweating as the heat from the flames pulsed and shimmered in the air. There was an aura of safety here, Kira felt. She willed her body to relax.

"You have a fear look to you," the dyer observed.

"A beast followed me on the path," Kira explained, trying to breathe normally. The panic was beginning to subside but she still felt tense. "I could hear it in the bushes. I could hear its steps, and sometimes it growled."

To her surprise, Annabella chuckled. The old woman had always been kind to her and patient. Why would she laugh at her fear?

"I can't run," Kira explained, "because of my leg."

"No need of running," Annabella said. She stirred the water in the pot, which was beginning to show occasional small bubbles at the surface. "We'll boil coneflowers for a brownish green," she said. "Just the flower heads. The leaves and stems make gold." With a nod of her head, she indicated a filled sack of flower heads on the ground nearby.

Kira picked up the sack. When Annabella, testing the water with her stick, nodded, she emptied the massed blossoms into the pot. Together they watched as the mixture began to simmer. Then Annabella laid her stirring stick on the ground.

“Come inside,” the old woman said. “I’ll give you tea for calming.” From a nearby, smaller fire, she lifted a kettle from its hook and carried it into the cott.

Kira followed her. She knew the flower heads would have to boil till midday and then remain steeping in their water for many hours more. Extracting the colors was always a slow process. The coneflower dye-water would not be ready for use until the next morning.

The dyeing yard, affected by the fire, was already sultry and almost oppressive. But inside, the cott was cool, protected by its thick walls. Dried plants, beige and fragile, hung from the ceiling rafters. On a thick wooden table by the window, piles of colored yarns lay ready for sorting. It was part of Kira’s learning to name and sort the threads. She went to her place at the sorting table, set her stick against the wall, and sat down. Behind her, Annabella poured water from the kettle over dried leaves that she had placed in two thick mugs.

“This deep brown is from the goldenrod shoots, isn’t it?” Kira held the strands to the window light. “It looks lighter than when it was wet. But it’s still a fine brown.” She had helped the dyer prepare the shoots for their dye-bath a few days before.

Annabella brought the mugs to the table. She glanced at the strands in Kira’s hand and nodded. “The goldenrod be blossoming soon. We’ll use the blossoms fresh, not dried, for brightest yellow. And the blossoms boil only a short time, not as long as the shoots.”

More bits of knowledge to grasp and hold in her memory. She would ask Thomas to write them down with the rest. Kira sipped at the strong hot tea and thought again about the ominous stalking sound in the woods.

“I was so frightened on my way here,” she confessed. “Truly, Annabella, I can’t run at all. My leg’s a useless thing.” She looked down at it, ashamed.

The old woman shrugged. “It brung you here,” she said.

“Yes, and I’m grateful for that. But I move so slowly.” Kira stroked the rough side of the earthen mug, thinking. “When Matt and Branch come with me, nothing stalks me. Maybe Matt would let me bring Branch each day. Even a little dog might scare the beasts back.”

Annabella laughed. “There be no beasts,” she said.

Kira stared at her. Of course no beasts would come to this clearing where fires glowed. And the old woman seemed never to leave the

clearing, never to walk the path to the village. “All I need be here,” she had told Kira, speaking disdainfully of the village and its noisy life. But still she had lived to be four syllables and had acquired four generations of wisdom. Why did she suddenly sound like an ignorant tyke, pretending that there was no danger? Like Matt, beating his chest with bravado and pasting it thick with swamp grass that he called a manly pelt?

Pretending didn’t keep you safe.

“I heard it growl,” Kira said in a low voice.

“Name the threads,” Annabella commanded.

Kira sighed. “Yarrow,” she said and set some pale yellow next to the deep brown. The dyer nodded.

She examined a brighter yellow in the light. “Tansy,” she decided finally, and the dyer nodded again.

“It growled,” Kira said once more.

“There be no beasts,” the dyer repeated firmly.

Kira continued to sort and name the threads. “Madder,” she said, stroking the deep red, one of her favorites. She picked up a pale lavender near it and frowned. “I don’t know this one. It’s pretty.”

“Elderberry,” the old woman told her. “But it don’t stay fast. It don’t linger.”

Kira folded the lavender threads in her hand. “Annabella,” she said finally, “it growled. It *did.*”

“Then it be human, playing at beast,” Annabella told her in a firm and certain voice. “Meaning to keep you scairt of the woods. There be no beasts.”

Together, slowly, they sorted and named the threads.

Later, walking home through a silent forest with no frightening sounds from the thick bushes on either side of the path, Kira wondered what human would have stalked her, and why.

“Thomas,” Kira asked as they ate together, “have you ever seen a beast?”

“Not alive.”

“You’ve seen a dead one, then?”

“We all have. When the hunters bring them in. The other night, remember? They brought them in after the hunt. There was a huge pile over by the butcher’s yard.”

Kira wrinkled her nose, remembering. “What a smell,” she said. “But, Thomas—”

He waited for her question. Tonight for dinner they had been brought meat in a thick sauce. Beside it on the plate were some small roasted potatoes.

Kira pointed at the meat on her own plate. “*This* is what the hunters brought. It’s hare, I think.”

He nodded, agreeing.

“Everything the hunters brought in was like this. Wild rabbit. Some birds. There wasn’t anything, well, anything very large.”

“There were deer. I saw two at the butcher’s.”

“But deer are gentle, frightened things. The hunters bring nothing with claws or fangs. They never catch anything that could be called a beast.”

Thomas shuddered. “Lucky. A beast could kill.”

Kira thought of her father. Taken by beasts.

“Annabella says there be none,” she confided.

“Be none?” Thomas looked puzzled.

“That’s the way she said it. ‘There be no beasts.’ ”

“She speaks like Matt?” Thomas had not met the old dyer.

Kira nodded. “A bit. Perhaps she grew up in the Fen.”

They ate in silence for a moment. Finally Kira asked again. “So you’ve never seen a real beast?”

“No,” Thomas acknowledged.

“But probably you know someone who has.”

He thought for a moment and then shook his head. “Do you?” he asked.

Kira looked at the table. It had always been hard to talk of it, even to her mother. “My father was taken by beasts,” she told him.

“You saw it?” His voice was shocked.

“No. I was not yet born.”

“Your mother saw?”

She tried to remember her mother’s telling. “No. She didn’t. He went on the hunt. Everyone says that he was a fine hunter. But he didn’t return. They came to my mother with the news, that he’d been attacked and taken by beasts on the hunt.”

She looked at him, puzzled. “Yet Annabella says there be none.”

“How could she know?” Thomas asked skeptically.

“She’s four syllables, Thomas. Those who live to four syllables know all there is.”

Thomas nodded in agreement, then yawned. He had been working hard all day. His tools still lay on the worktable: small chisels with which he had been meticulously recarving, reshaping the worn, smooth places on the elaborate staff that the Singer used. It was painstaking work that allowed for no error. Thomas had told her that often his head ached and he had to stop again and again to rest his eyes.

“I’ll go so you can rest,” Kira told him. “I must put away my own work before bed.”

She returned to her room at the other end of the corridor and folded the robe that still lay on her table. She had worked on the stitchery throughout the afternoon, after her return from the forest. She had shown it to Jamison as she did each day, and he had nodded in approval. Now Kira was tired too. The long walks to the dyer’s cott each day were exhausting, but at the same time the fresh air made her feel cleansed and invigorated. Thomas should get outside more, she thought, and then laughed to herself; she sounded like a scolding mother.

After a bath—how she enjoyed the warm water now!—Kira put on the simple nightgown that was provided clean for her each day. Then she went to the carved box and took the scrap of fabric with her to her bed. The fear of the thing in the bushes by the path lingered with her still, and she thought of it as she waited for sleep.

Is it true, that there be no beasts? Her thoughts framed the question, and her mind responded in a whisper to herself as the fabric lay curled warm in the palm of her hand.

There be none.

What of my father, then, him taken by beasts? Kira drifted into sleep, the words gliding slippery from her thoughts. She dreamed the question, her breath soft and even against the pillow.

The fabric gave a kind of answer but it was no more than a flutter, like a breeze across her that she would not remember when she woke at dawn. The scrap told her something of her father—something important, something that mattered—but the knowledge entered her sleep, trembling through like a dream, and in the morning she did not know that it was there at all.

Twelve

WHEN THE BELL for rising rang, Kira awoke with a sense that something had changed: she had an awareness of a difference, but had forgotten what the difference was. She sat for a moment on the edge of her bed, thinking. But she could not grasp whatever it was and finally stopped trying. Sometimes, she knew, lost memories and forgotten dreams came back more easily if you put them out of your mind.

Outside, it was stormy. Wind shook the trees and blew a sheet of heavy rain against the building. The hard ground below had turned to mud overnight, and it was clear that Kira would not go to the dyer's cott today. Just as well, she thought; there was much work to do on the robe, and autumn-start, the time of the Gathering, was approaching. Recently Jamison had been stopping by sometimes twice a day to see the progress she had made. He seemed pleased by her work.

"Here," he had said to her just the day before yesterday, smoothing his hand across the large undecorated place, "is where you will start your own work. After this year's Gathering, after you've finished with the restoration, you'll have this entire section to work on for years to come."

Kira touched the place where his hand lay. She tried to determine whether her fingers would feel the magic there. But there was only emptiness. There was a feeling of unfilled need.

He seemed to sense her uncertainty and reassured her. "Don't worry," he said. "We will explain to you what we want pictured there."

Kira didn't reply. His reassurance troubled her. It wouldn't be instruction that she needed, it would be the magic to come to her hands.

Remembering the conversation, Kira thought suddenly, *Jamison! I can ask him about the beasts!* He had told her that he had been part of the hunt that day, that he had seen her father's death.

And maybe she would ask Matt too. Wild little thing that he was, Kira had no doubt that Matt had crossed the boundaries often and had gone to places tykes were not supposed to go. She laughed quietly, thinking of Matt and his mischief. He spied on everything, knew everything. Had she and Thomas not stopped him, he would have tagged along with the men on the hunt and put himself in danger. Perhaps he had done it before.

Perhaps he had seen beasts.

When the tender came with the morning meal, Kira asked that the lights be lit. The rainstorm made the room dim, even beside the window where she sat to work. Finally she settled herself with the outspread robe and placed the frame around the newest section waiting to be repaired. As she had often done, she followed with her eyes and fingers the complex story of the world portrayed on the robe: the starting point, long mended now, with the green water, the dark beasts on its shore, and the men bloodied by the hunt. Beyond, villages appeared, with dwellings of all kinds; curving stitches of smoke from fires were threaded with dull purplish grays. It was fortunate that it needed no repair because Kira had no threads to match. She thought they had been dyed with basil and Annabella had told her how difficult the basil was and how badly it stained your hands.

Then complex, whirling patches of fire: oranges, reds, yellows. Here and there on the robe these fires appeared, a repetitive pattern of ruin, and within the intricately stitched patterns of the bright destructive threads of fire, Kira could see figures of humans portrayed: people destroyed, their tiny villages crumbling, and later even larger, much more splendid towns burned and ravished by fiery destruction. In some places on the robe there was a feeling of entire worlds ending. Yet always there would emerge, nearby, new growth. New people.

Ruin. Rebuilding. Ruin again. Regrowth. Kira followed the scenes with her hand as larger and greater cities appeared and larger, greater destruction took place. The cycle was so regular that its pattern took on a clear form: an up-and-down movement, wavelike. From the tiny corner where it began, where the first ruin came, it enlarged upon itself. The fires grew as the villages grew. All of them were still tiny, created from the smallest stitches and combinations of stitches, but she could see their pattern of growth and how each time the ruin was worse and the rebuilding more difficult.

But the sections of serenity were exquisite. Miniature flowers of countless hues flourished in meadows streaked with golden-threaded sunlight. Human figures embraced. The pattern of the peaceful times felt immensely tranquil compared to the tortured chaos of the others.

Tracing with her finger the white and pink-tinged clouds against pale skies of gray or green, Kira wished again for blue. The color of calm.

What was it Annabella had said? That they had blue yonder? What did that mean? Who were *they?* And where was *yonder?*

More unanswered questions.

Great sheets of rain spattered against the window, distracting her. Kira sighed and watched the trees bend and sway in the wind. Thunder muttered in the distance.

She wondered where Matt was, what he was doing in this weather. She knew that ordinary people—those who lived near the place where she and her mother had shared their cott—would be indoors today, the men sullen and edgy, the women complaining loudly because weather kept them from their usual chores. Tykes, confined, would be fighting and then wailing in response to swift backhanded slaps from their mothers.

Her own life with her soft-spoken widowed mother had been different. But it had set her apart too and made others, like Vandara, hostile.

"Kira?" She heard Thomas's voice and his knock at her door.

"Come in."

He came and stood by her window, eyeing the rain. "I was just wondering what Matt's up to in this weather," Kira said.

Thomas began to laugh. "Well, I can answer that. He's up to finishing my breakfast. He arrived early this morning, dripping wet. He said his mother threw him out because he was noisy and troublesome. I think he just wanted breakfast though."

"Branch too?"

"Branch too. Of course."

As if in response, they heard the tap-tapping of the dog's feet in the corridor; then Branch appeared in the doorway, his head cocked, ears up, bent tail wagging exuberantly. Kira knelt and scratched behind his ear.

"Kira?" Thomas was still staring through the window at the rain.

"Hmmm?" She looked up from the dog.

"I heard it again in the night. I'm certain of it this time. The sound of a child crying. It seemed to come from the floor below."

She looked at him and saw that he was concerned. "I wonder, Kira," he said hesitantly, "would you go with me? To explore a bit? I suppose it could be just the sound of wind."

It was true that outside the wind was relentless. Tree branches lashed the side of the building and torn leaves whirled away. The sound of the storm, however, was nothing like the sound of a crying child.

“Maybe an animal?” Kira suggested. “I’ve heard cats yowling so that they sound like babies with colicky bellies.”

“Cats?” Thomas repeated dubiously. “Well, maybe.”

“Or a young goat? They make a crying sound.”

Thomas shook his head. “It wasn’t a goat.”

“Well, no one ever said we couldn’t explore,” Kira commented. “Not to me, anyway.”

“Nor me.”

“All right, then, I’ll go with you. The light’s not good for working this morning anyway.” She stood. Branch wriggled with anticipation. “What about Matt? I suppose we should take him along.”

“Take me where?” Matt appeared in the doorway, damp-haired and barefoot with crumbs on his chin, jam on the edges of his mouth, and wearing a too-large woven shirt belonging to Thomas. “Shall we be having an adventure?”

“Matt?” Kira remembered her intention to ask him. “Have you ever seen a beast? A real one?”

Matt’s face lighted. “Billions and billions.” He made a beast face, teeth exposed. He roared and his dog jumped away from him in alarm.

Kira rolled her eyes and looked at Thomas.

“Here, Branchie.” Matt, his beast disguise abandoned, squatted beside the dog, who came forward and sniffed him. “Some smearies for you.” He grinned as the dog licked breakfast remains from his face.

“Yes, we’ll have ourselves an adventure,” Kira told him. She laid the protective cover over the robe. “We thought we’d explore a bit. We’ve never been on the floor below this one.”

Matt eyes widened in delight at the idea of an exploration.

“I heard a noise last night,” Thomas explained. “Probably nothing, but we thought we’d go take a look.”

“Noise don’t never be *nothing,*” Matt pointed out. Quite rightly, Kira thought.

“Well, it’s probably nothing important,” Thomas amended.

“But maybe it be interesting!” Matt said eagerly.

Together, followed by the dog, the three started down the corridor toward the stairs.

Thirteen

USUALLY BRANCH SCAMPERED eagerly back and forth, leading the way, then circling back. This morning he was more cautious and followed behind. The thunder was still grumbling outside, and the hallway was dimly lighted. Thomas led the way. The dog's toenails clicked on the tiles. Matt's bare feet moved silently beside him, and the only other sounds were Kira's walking stick, which made a muted thump with each step, and the dragging of her twisted leg.

Like the floor above, where they lived, this was simply an empty corridor lined with closed wooden doors.

Thomas turned a corner. Then he jumped back as if he had been startled by something. The others, even the dog, froze.

"Shhhh." Thomas gestured for silence with his finger to his mouth.

Ahead, around the corner, they heard footsteps. Then a knock, the opening of a door, and a voice. The voice and the inflection of the words—though the words themselves were not clear—sounded familiar to Kira.

"It's Jamison," she mouthed silently to Thomas. He nodded, agreeing, and peered around the corner.

It occurred to Kira that Jamison had been her defender, had been the one responsible for her being here at all in this new life. So there was really no reason to huddle here in the dim hallway, hiding from him. Yet she was oddly fearful.

She tiptoed forward and leaned beside Thomas. They could see that one of the doors was open. An indistinct murmur of voices came from within. One voice was Jamison's. The other was that of a child.

The child cried briefly.

Jamison spoke.

Then the child, surprisingly, began to sing.

Its clear, high voice soared. No words. Just the voice, almost instrumentlike in its clarity. It rose, leveled at a high note, and hovered there for a long moment.

Kira felt something tug at her clothing. She looked down and saw Matt beside her, wide-eyed, pulling at her skirt. She motioned to him to stay silent.

Then the singing broke off abruptly, and the child cried again.

They heard Jamison's voice. It was harsh now. Kira had never heard him speak in that way.

The door slammed shut, and the voices were muted.

Matt was still tugging at her, and Kira leaned down so that he could whisper what he had to say.

"It's me friend," he said urgently. "Well, not really me friend 'cause me and my mates don't like girl tykes none. But I knowed her. She lived in the Fen."

Thomas was listening too. "The one who was singing?" he asked.

Matt nodded enthusiastically. "Her name be Jo. She always be singing in the Fen. I didn't never hear her cry like that none."

"Shhh." Kira tried to quiet Matt but he had a difficult time whispering. "Let's go back," she suggested. "We can talk in my room."

Branch led now, happy to be retreating and enthusiastic about the possibility of more food back where breakfast had been. Stealthily they climbed the stairs and returned.

Safe in Kira's quarters, Matt perched on the bed with his bare feet dangling and told them about the girl who sang. "She be littler'n me," he said. He jumped briefly to the floor and held his own hand level with his shoulder. "She be about this high. And all the peoples in the Fen? They get so happy, hearing her sing." He climbed back onto the bed; Branch jumped up beside him and curled on Kira's pillow.

"But why is she here?" Kira asked, puzzled.

Matt gave an exaggerated shrug. "She be an orphan now. Her mum and pa, they died," he explained.

"Both of them? At the same time?" Kira and Thomas looked at each other. They both knew loss. But had it happened again? To another tyke?

Matt nodded importantly. He liked being the messenger, the bringer of information. "First her mum gets the sickness, and then when draggers take her mum to the Field? And her pa go to watch the spirit?"

Kira and Thomas nodded.

"Well," Matt said, making a dramatically sad face, "her pa be so sad at the Field, sitting there, that he taken a big pointy stick and stab hisself through the heart.

"That's what them all said, anyways," he added, seeing the shocked looks his story had produced.

“But he had a tyke! He had a little girl!” Kira said, finding it unbelievable that a father would do such a thing.

Matt shrugged again. He considered that. “Maybe he didn’t like her none?” he suggested. Then after a moment he frowned and said, “But how could he not like her none when she sing so good?”

“And how did she get here?” Thomas asked. “What is she doing here?”

“I been told they give her away to someone who had a craving for more tykes,” Matt said.

Kira nodded. “Orphans always go to someone else.”

“Unless—” Thomas said slowly.

“Unless what?” Kira and Matt asked together.

He pondered that. “Unless they sing,” he said at last.

Jamison came to Kira’s room, as he always did, later in the day. Outside, the rain still fell. Matt, undaunted, had gone off with his dog to find his mates, wherever they might be in such weather. Thomas had returned to his own quarters to work, and Kira too with extra lamps lighted by the tender, had settled to her task, stitching carefully throughout the afternoon. The interruption when Jamison knocked on her door was welcome. The tender brought tea and they sat companionably together in the room while the rain spattered against the windows.

As usual, he examined her work carefully. His face was the same creased, pleasant face she had known now for many weeks. His voice was courteous and friendly as together they scrutinized the folds of the outstretched robe.

Yet the memory of the harsh sound of his murmured speech in the room below prevented Kira from asking him about the singing child.

“Your work is very fine,” Jamison told her. He leaned forward, looking carefully at the section she had just completed, where she had meticulously matched the subtle differences of several yellows and filled in a background area with tiny knotted stitches that formed a texture. “Better than your mother’s, although hers was excellent,” he added. “She taught you the stitches?”

Kira nodded. “Yes, most of them.” She didn’t tell him how others seemed simply to come to her untaught. It seemed boastful to speak of it.

“And Annabella the dyes,” she added. “I’m using many of her threads still, but I’m beginning now to make my own when I’m at her cott.”

“She knows all there is, the old woman,” Jamison said. He looked at Kira’s leg with apparent concern. “The walk is not too hard for you? One day we’ll have the fire pit and the pots here for you. I’m thinking of preparing a place just below.” He gestured toward the window, indicating an area between the building and the edge of the woods beyond.

“No. I’m strong. But—” She hesitated.

“Yes?”

“Sometimes I’ve been fearful on the path,” Kira told him. “The forest is so close all around.”

“There is nothing to be afraid of there.”

“I do fear beasts,” she confessed.

“As you should. But stay on the path always. The beasts will not come near the path.” His voice was as reassuring as it had been the day of her trial.

“I heard growling once,” Kira confided, shuddering a little at the memory of it.

“There is nothing to fear if you don’t stray.”

“Annabella said the same thing. She told me there was nothing to fear.”

“She speaks with four-syllable wisdom.”

“But, Jamison?” For some reason, Kira hesitated to tell him this. Perhaps she didn’t want to question the old woman’s knowledge. But now, feeling reassured by Jamison’s interest and concern, she told him the startling thing that the old dyer had said with such certainty. “She said that there are no beasts.”

He looked at Kira oddly. The expression on his face seemed a mixture of astonishment and anger. “No beasts? She said that?”

“‘There be no beasts,’” Kira repeated. “She said it just that way, several times.”

Jamison laid the section of robe he’d been examining back down on the table. “She’s very old,” he said firmly. “It’s dangerous for her to speak that way. Her mind is beginning to wander.”

Kira looked at him dubiously. For weeks now she had worked with the dyer. The lists of plants, the many characteristics of each, the details of the dyeing procedures, so much complex knowledge; all of it was clear and complete. Kira had seen no sign, no hint of a wandering mind.

Might the old woman know something that no one else—even someone with the status of Jamison—knew?

“Have you *seen* beasts?” Kira asked him hesitantly.

“Many, many times. The woods are filled with them,” Jamison said. “Never stray past the village limits. Do *not* go beyond the path.”

Kira looked at him. His expression was hard to discern, but his voice was firm and certain.

“Don’t forget, Kira,” he continued, “I saw your father taken by beasts. It was a hideous thing. Terrible.”

Jamison sighed and patted her hand sympathetically. Then he turned to leave. “You are doing a fine job,” he said again, appreciatively.

“Thank you,” Kira murmured. She put her hand, still feeling his touch, into her pocket. Her special scrap of cloth lay folded there. She felt no comfort from it. As the door closed behind Jamison, she stroked the cloth, seeking its solace, but it seemed to withdraw from her touch, almost as if it were trying to warn her of something.

The rain still fell steadily. Through it, she thought for a moment that she could hear the child sob on the floor below.

Fourteen

THE SUN WAS shining in the morning but Kira woke groggy after a fitful sleep. Following an early breakfast she tied her sandals carefully, anticipating the walk to Annabella's. Maybe the clear, cooler air after the rain would wake her a bit and make her feel better. Her head ached.

Thomas's door was closed. He was probably still asleep. There were no sounds either from the floor below. Kira made her way out of doors, relishing the breeze that lingered after the storm and was pine-scented from trees that were still glistening and wet. It blew her hair away from her face and the misery of her sleepless night began to subside.

Leaning on her stick, Kira made her way to the place where she ordinarily turned from the village and entered the woods on the path. It was quite near the weaving shed.

"Kira!" A woman's voice called to her from the shed, and she saw that it was Marlena, already at the loom so early.

Kira smiled, waved, and detoured to greet the woman.

"We miss you! Them tykes that clean up for us now are worthless. Horrid lazy! And one stole my lunch yesterday." Marlena scowled her outrage. Her feet slowed on the treadle and Kira knew that she was eager to chat and gossip.

"That be him now, that wicked tyke!"

A familiar wet nose touched Kira's ankle. She reached down to scratch Branch and saw Matt grinning at her from behind the corner of the weaving shed. "You there!" Marlena called angrily and he drew back to hide.

"Marlena," Kira asked, remembering that the weaving woman lived in the Fen, "did you ever know a girl tyke named Jo?"

"Jo?" The woman was still peering toward the shed corner, hoping to catch a glimpse of Matt and scold him. "You there!" she called again, but Matt was too sly and too clever to respond.

"Yes. She used to sing."

"Ah, the singing tyke! Yes, I knowed her. Not her name though. But her singing, we all knowed that! Like a bird, it was."

"What happened to her?"

Marlena shrugged. Her feet began to move slowly again on the treadle. “She be tooken off. They give her off to somebody, I guess. She be orphaned, I heared.”

She leaned forward and whispered loudly, “Some said her receive the songs by magic. Nobody teached her. The songs, they just come.”

Her feet paused. She gestured to Kira to come closer. Furtively, Marlena confided, “I heared that them songs was full of knowledges. She be only a small tyke, you know? But when she singed, she had knowledges of things that wasn’t even happened yet!

“I never heared it myself, only heared tell of it.”

Marlena laughed and her feet took up the rapid pace on the treadle that caused the rhythmic motion of the loom. Kira nodded goodbye to her and started toward the path.

Matt met her there, appearing from behind a tree where he’d been hiding. Kira glanced back but Marlena was busy at her loom and had forgotten them both.

“Are you coming with me this morning?” she asked Matt. “I thought you found it boring at the dyer’s hut.”

“You mustn’t go today,” Matt said solemnly. Then he glanced at his dog and began to laugh. “Looky! Old Branch, him trying to catch him a lizzie!”

Kira looked and laughed too. Branch had chased a small lizard to the base of a tree and was watching, frustrated, as it slithered up the trunk beyond his reach. He stood on his hind legs and his front ones churned in the air. The lizard looked back and a moist stiletto tongue darted in and out. Kira watched for a moment, chuckling, and then turned again to Matt.

“What do you mean, I mustn’t go? I missed yesterday because of the rain. She’s expecting me.”

Matt looked solemn. “She not be expecting nobody. She be gone to the Field right when the sun be coming up. Draggers tooken her. I seen it.”

“To the Field? What are you talking about, Matt? She couldn’t possibly walk to the Field from her cott! It’s too far! She’s too old! And she wouldn’t want to anyway.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “I didn’t say she be wanting to! I said they *tooken* her! She be dead!”

“*Dead?* Annabella? How can that be?” Kira was stunned. She had seen the old woman two days before. They had sipped tea together.

Matt took her question seriously. “It be like this,” he replied. He flung himself to the ground, lay on his back with both arms outstretched, opened his eyes wide, and stared blankly upward. Branch, curious, nosed at his neck, but Matt held the pose.

Kira stared in dismay at his grotesque but accurate imitation of death. “Don’t, Matt,” she said at last. “Get up. Don’t do that.”

Matt sat up and took the dog into his lap. He tilted his head and looked at Kira curiously. “Probably they be giving you her stuff,” he announced.

“You’re certain it was Annabella?”

Matt nodded. “I seen her face when they tooken her to the Field.” Briefly he made the death face again, with its blank eyes.

Kira bit her lip. She turned away from the path. Matt was correct, she should not go into the woods now. But she did not know where to go. She could wake Thomas, she supposed. But for what? Thomas had never met the old dyer.

Finally she turned and looked back at the large Council Edifice where she lived. The door through which she came and went was in the side wing. The large door in front was the one she had entered on the day of her trial so many weeks before. The Council of Guardians would probably not be meeting today in the big chamber where her trial had been. But Jamison must be someplace inside. She decided that she would look for him. He would know what had happened, would tell her what to do.

“No, Matt,” she said when the tyke began to follow her.

His face fell. He had sensed an adventure. “Go wake Thomas,” Kira told him. “Tell him what happened. Tell him that Annabella has died, and that I have gone to find Jamison.”

“Jamison? Who’s he?”

Kira was startled at Matt’s ignorance. Jamison had become so much a part of her life that she had forgotten the tyke wouldn’t know his name. “He’s the guardian who first took me to my room,” she explained. “Remember? A very tall man with dark hair? You were with us that day.

“He always wears one of Thomas’s carvings,” she added. “Quite a nice one, with an outline of a tree.”

Matt nodded at that. “I seen him!” he said eagerly.

“Where?” Kira looked around. If Jamison was nearby, if she could find him at one of the workplaces, she wouldn’t have to search the Council Edifice.

“He be there, watching, walking beside, when the draggers tooken the old dyer to the Field,” Matt said.

So Jamison already knew.

The corridors were, as always, quiet and dim. At first Kira felt secretive and stealthy, as if she should make her footsteps as silent as possible, difficult with her stick and her dragging leg. Then she reminded herself that she was not hiding, not in danger. She was simply looking for the man who had been her mentor since her mother’s death. She could even, if she chose, call his name loudly in hopes that he would hear and respond. But calling out seemed inappropriate and so she simply continued down the hall in silence.

As she had expected, the great hall was empty. She knew that it was used only for special occasions: the annual Gathering; trials, such as her own; and other ceremonies that she had never seen. She pulled the huge door open a crack, peeked in, and turned away to look elsewhere in the building.

She knocked timidly on several doors. Finally at one a voice answered with a gruff “Yes?” and she pushed the door open to see one of the tenders, a man she didn’t recognize, busy at a desk.

“I’m looking for Jamison,” Kira explained.

The tender shrugged. “He’s not here.”

She could see that. “Do you know where he might be?” she asked politely.

“In the wing, probably.” The tender looked down again at his work. He seemed to be sorting papers.

Kira knew that “the wing” was where her own quarters were. That made sense. Probably Jamison was looking for her even now, to tell her of the old woman’s death. She had started out much earlier than usual this morning, thinking to make up for the day wasted yesterday by rain. If she had waited, Jamison could have found her, told her of the death, explained, and she would not feel so shocked and solitary.

“Excuse me, but can I get to the wing from here without going back outside?”

Impatiently the tender gestured to his left. “Door at the end,” he said.

Kira thanked him, closed his office door behind her, and went to the end of the long hall. The door there was not locked, and when she opened it she

saw a familiar stairway. She had tiptoed down it with Thomas and Matt just yesterday during the storm. She knew the stairs would return her to the corridor above, where she would find her room and Thomas's.

She stood motionless and listened. The tender had said that Jamison was probably somewhere in the wing, but she heard no sound.

On a whim, instead of taking the stairs to her room, Kira remained on the first floor. She went to the corner where she and Thomas had hidden the day before, the same corner they had peered around to see where the crying was coming from. In the silence and emptiness, she rounded the corner and approached the door that had been open the afternoon before.

She leaned next to it, her ear against the wood, and listened. But there was no sound of crying, none of singing.

After a moment, she tried the knob. But the door was locked. Finally, very softly, she knocked.

She heard a rustling sound inside, then the muffled sound of small footsteps on a bare floor.

She knocked softly again.

She heard a whimper.

Kira knelt by the door. It was difficult, with her crippled leg. But she lowered herself until her mouth was beside the large keyhole. Then she called softly, "Jo?"

"I'm being good," a frightened, desperate little voice replied. "I'm practicing."

"I know you are," Kira said through the keyhole. She could hear small, shuddering sobs.

"I'm your friend, Jo. My name is Kira."

"Please, I want me mum," the tyke pleaded. She sounded very young.

For some reason Kira thought of the enclosure that had been built on the site of her old cott. Now tykes were penned there, enclosed by thorn bushes. It seemed cruel. But at least they were not isolated. They had each other, and they were able to look out through the thick foliage and see the village life around them.

Why was this small tyke locked in a room all alone?

"I will come back," she called softly through the door.

"Will you bring me mum?" The little voice was close to the keyhole. Kira could almost feel the breath.

Matt had told her that the tyke's parents were both dead. "I will come back," Kira said again. "Jo? Listen to me."

The tyke sniffled. In the distance, on the floor above, Kira heard a door open.

"I must go," Kira whispered firmly through the hole. "But listen, Jo: I will help you, I promise. Hush now. Don't tell anyone I was here."

She rose quickly. Clutching her stick, she made her way back to the staircase. When she reached the second floor and rounded the corner, she saw Jamison standing in the open doorway to her room. He came forward, greeted her with sympathy, and told her the news of Annabella's death.

Suddenly wary, Kira said nothing of the child below.

Fifteen

"LOOK! THEY'RE SETTING up a dyeing-place for me."

It was midday. Kira pointed down to the area below the window, a small piece of land between the Edifice and the edge of the woods. Thomas came to the window and looked. Workers had raised a structure that Kira could see was to be a shed; under its roof, long poles from which to hang the wet yarns and threads to dry were already in place.

"It's better than anything she ever had," Kira murmured, remembering Annabella wistfully. "I'm going to miss her," she added.

It had all happened so quickly. Annabella's death, so sudden; and now, only a day later, the new dyeing-place was being made.

"What's that?" Thomas pointed. To the side, the workers were digging a shallow pit. A support for hanging kettles was being pounded into place at the side.

"It'll be for fire. You need a very hot fire always, for the boiling of the dyes.

"Oh, Thomas," Kira sighed, turning away from the window, "I'll never remember how to do it all."

"Yes you will. I have it all written down, everything you told me. We'll just repeat it and repeat it. Look! What's that they're bringing?"

She looked again and saw them stacking bundles of dried plants beside the new shed. "They must have brought all the ones Annabella had hanging from the beams in her cott. So at least I'll have a place to start. I think I know the names, if they haven't mixed them all together out of ignorance."

Then she chuckled, watching one of the workers set down a covered pot and turn his face away with a grimace of disgust. "It's the mordant," Kira explained. "It smells terrible." She didn't want to say the rude word to Thomas, but it was what Annabella had called her pisspot, and its contents were a surprisingly vital ingredient in the making of the dyes.

The workers had begun to arrive early that morning, bearing the kettles and plants and equipment, while Jamison was still in Kira's room describing the events of the day before. A sudden death, he had explained,

the way death often came to those of great age. She slept, Annabella had, napping on the rainy day, and didn't wake. That was all. No mystery to it.

Perhaps she felt that she had completed her job by teaching Kira, Jamison pointed out solemnly. Sometimes, he told her, it was the way death came: a drifting-away when one's tasks were accomplished. "And there's no need to burn her cott," he added, "because there was no illness. So it will stay as it is. Someday you can live there, if you like, after you've finished your work here."

Kira nodded, accepting his words. The old woman's spirit, she realized, would still be in her body. "She'll need a watcher," Kira pointed out to Jamison. "Could I go and sit with her? I did for my mother."

But Jamison said no. Time was short. The Gathering was coming. Four days could not be lost. Kira must work on the robe; others would do the watching for the old dyer.

So Kira would mourn all alone.

After Jamison had gone she sat silently, remembering how solitary Annabella's chosen life had been, how unconnected to the village. Only then did it occur to Kira to wonder, *Who found her? How did they know to look?*

"Thomas, come away from the window now. I need to tell you about something."

Reluctantly he came to where she was sitting at the table, though she could see from his face that he was still listening to the noise of the construction below. *Boys,* Kira thought. They were always interested in such things. If Matt were around, he'd be down there underfoot, getting in the way, wanting to help with the building.

"This morning—" she began. Then, sensing his inattention, "Thomas! *Listen!*"

He grinned, turned toward her, and listened.

"I went to the room below, the one where we heard the tyke crying."

"And singing," Thomas reminded her.

"Yes. And singing."

"Her name is Jo, according to Matt," Thomas said. "See? I'm paying attention. Why did you go down there?"

"I was looking for Jamison at first," Kira explained, "and I found myself on that floor. So I went to the door, thinking I might peek in and

see if the tyke was all right. But it was locked!”

Thomas nodded. He looked unsurprised.

“But they’ve never locked *my* door, Thomas,” she said.

“No, because you were already grown, already two syllables when you came here. But I was young; I was still Tom when I arrived,” he said. “They locked my door.”

“You were held *captive?*”

He frowned, remembering. “Not really. It was to keep me safe, I think. And to make me pay attention. I was young and I didn’t want to work all the time.” He grinned. “I was a little like Matt, I think. Playful.”

“Were they harsh with you?” Kira asked, remembering the sound of Jamison’s voice speaking to the little girl.

He thought. “Stern,” he said finally.

“But, Thomas, the tyke below—Jo? She was crying. *Sobbing.* She wanted her mum, she said.”

“Matt told us her mother died.”

“She doesn’t seem to know that.”

Thomas tried to recall his own circumstances. “I think they told me about my parents. But maybe not right away. It was a long time ago. I remember someone brought me here and showed me where everything was, and how it worked—”

“The bathroom and the hot water,” Kira said, with a wry smile.

“Yes, that. And all the tools. I was already a Carver. I’d been carving for a long time—”

“—the way I’d already been doing the threadings. And the way the tyke, Jo—”

“Yes,” Thomas said. “Matt said she was already a singer.”

Kira, thinking, smoothed the folds of her skirt. “So each of us,” she said slowly, “was already a—I don’t know what to call it.”

“Artist?” Thomas suggested. “That’s a word. I’ve never heard anyone say it, but I’ve read it in some of the books. It means, well, someone who is able to make something beautiful. Would that be the word?”

“Yes, I guess it would. The tyke makes her singing, and it is beautiful.”

“When she isn’t crying,” Thomas pointed out.

“So we are each artists, and we were each orphaned, and they brought us each here. I wonder why. Also, Thomas, there’s something else. Something strange.”

He was listening.

"This morning I talked to Marlena, a woman I know from the weaving shed. She lives in the Fen, and she remembered Jo, though she didn't know her name. She remembered a singing tyke."

"Everyone in the Fen would know of such a tyke."

Kira nodded, agreeing. "She said—how did she put it?" She tried to remember Marlena's description. "She said that the tyke seemed to have knowledges."

"Knowledges?"

"That was the word she used."

"What did she mean?"

"She said that the tyke seemed to have knowledge of things that hadn't happened yet. That the people in the Fen thought it was magic. She sounded a little frightened when she talked of it. And, Thomas?"

"What?" he asked.

Kira hesitated. "It made me think of what happens sometimes with my cloth. This small one." Kira opened the box he had made for her and held out the fabric scrap, reminding him. "I told you how it seems to speak to me.

"And I remember that you told me that you have a piece of wood that seems to do the same—"

"Yes. From when I was just a tyke, just beginning to carve. The one on the shelf. I've shown it to you."

"Could it be the same thing?" Kira asked cautiously. "Could it be what Marlena called *knowledges?*"

Thomas looked at her, and at the cloth that lay motionless in her hand. He frowned. "But why?" he asked at last.

Kira didn't know the answer. "Maybe it is something that artists have," she said, liking the sound of the word she had just learned. "A special kind of magic knowledge."

Thomas nodded and shrugged. "Well, it doesn't matter much, does it? We each have a good life now. Better tools than we did before. Good food. Work to do."

"But the tyke below? She sobs and sobs. And they won't let her out of the room." Kira remembered her promise. "Thomas, I told her I'd come back. And that I'd help her."

He looked dubious. "I don't think the guardians would like that."

Kira again remembered the severity she had heard in Jamison's voice. She remembered the slamming of the door. "No, I don't think they would," she agreed. "But at night. I'll creep down then, when they think we're all asleep. Except—" Her face fell.

"Except what?"

"It's locked. There's no way I can get in."

"Yes you can," Thomas told her.

"How?"

"I have a key," he said.

It was true. Back in his room, he showed her. "It was a long time ago," he explained. "But here I was, locked in, with all these fine tools. So I carved a key. It really was quite easy. The lock on the door is a simple one.

"And," he added, fingering the intricately carved wooden key, "it fits all the doors. All the locks are the same. I know because I tried them. I used to go out at night and roam the hallways, opening doors. All the rooms were empty then."

Kira shook her head. "You were really mischievous, weren't you?"

Thomas grinned. "I told you. Just like Matt."

"Tonight," Kira said, suddenly serious. "Will you come with me?"

Thomas nodded. "All right," he agreed. "Tonight."

Sixteen

EVENING CAME. KIRA, in Thomas's room, looked down through the window at the squalor of the village and listened to its chaotic din as workers in the various sheds finished their last chores. Down the lane she could see how the butcher threw a container of water over the stone doorstep of his hut, a useless gesture toward cleaning away the clotted filth. Nearer, she watched the women leaving the weaving shed where she had worked as helper for so much of her childhood.

Kira wondered, smiling, whether Matt had been there during the workday that had just ended. Assigned to cleaning-up chores, he had probably been underfoot with his mates, making trouble and stealing food from the women's lunches. From her place at the window, she couldn't see any sign of him or of his dog. She hadn't seen them all day.

She waited there with Thomas until long past dark, until the tenders had taken their food trays away. At last the entire building was still and the clamor from the village had subsided as well.

"Thomas," Kira suggested, "take your little piece of wood. The special one. I have my scrap with me."

"All right, but why?"

"I don't know exactly. I feel that we should."

Thomas got the small carved piece from its high shelf, and put it into his pocket. In his other pocket was the wooden key.

Together they went down the dimly lit corridor to the stairs.

Ahead of her, Thomas whispered, "Shhhh."

"I'm sorry," Kira whispered back. "The stick makes a noise. But I can't walk without it."

"Here, wait." They stopped beside one of the wall torches. Thomas ripped a length of cloth from the hem of his loose shirt. Deftly he tied it around the base of Kira's walking stick. The cloth muted the noise of the wooden stick on the tiled floor.

The pair made their way quickly down the flight of stairs and to the door of the room where Jo slept. They paused there and listened. But there were no sounds. Kira's hand, in her pocket, felt no warning from her scrap

of cloth. She nodded to Thomas and silently he inserted the big key and turned it to open the door.

Kira held her breath because she feared that a tender might be sharing the room to guard the tyke at night. But the room, illuminated only by pale moonlight through the window, held only one small bed and one small fast-asleep girl.

"I'll stay by the door to watch," Thomas murmured. "She knows you—or your voice, at least. You wake her."

Kira went to the bed and sat on its edge, propping her stick beside her. Gently she touched the small shoulder. "Jo," she said softly.

The little head, long hair tangled, turned restlessly. After a moment, the tyke opened her eyes with a startled, frightened look. "No, don't!" she cried out, pushing Kira's hand away.

"Shhhh," Kira whispered. "It's me. Remember, we talked through the door? Don't be afraid."

"I want me mum," the tyke wailed.

She was very small. Much smaller than Matt. Hardly more than a toddler. Kira remembered the power of the singing voice that she had heard, and marveled that it had come from this tiny, frightened waif of a thing.

Kira picked her up, cradled her, and rocked her back and forth. "Shhhh," she said. "Shhhh. It's all right. I'm your friend. And see over there? His name is Thomas. He's your friend too."

Gradually the tyke was soothed. Her eyes opened wide. Her thumb slid into her mouth and she spoke around it. "I be listening to you at the hole," she said, remembering.

"Yes, the keyhole. We whispered to each other."

"You know me mum? Can you bring her?"

Kira shook her head. "No, I'm afraid I can't. But I'll be here. I live just upstairs. And Thomas does, too."

Thomas came nearer and knelt by the bed. The tyke stared at him suspiciously, and clutched Kira.

Thomas pointed to the ceiling. "I live right above you," he said in a gentle voice, "and I can hear you."

"You hear me singings?"

He smiled. "Yes. Your singing is very beautiful."

The tyke scowled. "They always be making me learn new ones."

“New songs?” Kira asked her.

Jo nodded unhappily. “Over and over. They be making me remember everythings. Me old songs, they just be there natural. But now they be stuffing new things into me and this poor head hurts horrid.” The tyke rubbed her tangled hair and sighed, a strangely adult sound that made Kira smile sympathetically.

Thomas was looking around the room, which held many of the same pieces of furniture as the rooms above. A bed. A tall wooden chest of drawers. A table and two chairs.

“Jo,” he said suddenly, “are you a good climber?”

She frowned and removed her thumb from her mouth. “I be climbing trees sometimes in the Fen. But me mum, she hits me when I do because she say I be breaking me legs and then they take me to the Field.”

Thomas nodded solemnly. “Yes, that’s probably true, and your mother didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Once draggers take you to the Field, you don’t never come back. Beasts take you.” The thumb popped back in.

“But look, Jo. If you could climb up there—” Thomas pointed to the top of the chest of drawers.

The wide eyes followed his pointing finger, and the tyke nodded.

“If you stood very tall up there, and if you had some tool, you could hit the ceiling and I would hear you.”

The tyke grinned at the thought. “You mustn’t do it just for fun,” Thomas added quickly. “Only if you really needed us.”

“Might I be trying it?” Jo asked eagerly.

Kira lifted her down to the floor. Like a limber animal the tyke scrambled from chair to tabletop, and from the tabletop she climbed to the top of the chest. Then she stood triumphantly. From below her woven nightdress emerged two bare thin legs.

“We need a tool,” Thomas murmured, looking around.

Remembering something from her own quarters, Kira went to the bathroom. As she had guessed, a thick hairbrush with a wooden handle lay on the shelf beside the sink.

“Try this,” she said, and handed it up to the tyke.

Smiling broadly, the little singer reached up and thumped the brush handle on the ceiling.

Thomas lifted her down and put her back into the bed. “That’s it, then,” he said. “If you need us, that’s the signal, Jo. But never just for fun. Only if you need help.”

“And we’ll come to see you too, even if you don’t thump,” Kira added. “After the tenders are gone.” She tucked the bed covers around the tyke. “Here, Thomas. Put this back, would you?” She handed him the hairbrush.

“We must go now,” she told Jo. “But do you feel better, knowing that you have friends up there?”

The tyke nodded. Her moist thumb slid into her mouth.

Kira smoothed the blanket. “Good night, then.” For a moment she sat there on the bed, feeling a vague memory of something else that should be done. Something from when she was a small tyke, like this, being put to bed.

She leaned down toward the little girl, intuitively. What was it that her mother had done when she was small? Kira put her lips on Jo’s forehead. It was an unfamiliar gesture but felt right.

The little girl made a small contented sound with her own lips against Kira’s face. “A little kissie,” she whispered. “Like me mum.”

Kira and Thomas parted in the upstairs corridor and made their way separately back to their own rooms. It was late, and as always they were expected to work in the morning and needed sleep.

As Kira prepared for bed, she thought about the frightened, lonely tyke below. What songs were they forcing her to learn? Why was she here at all? Ordinarily an orphaned tyke would be turned over to another family.

It was the same question that she and Thomas had discussed the day before. And the answer seemed to be the conclusion they had reached: they were artists, the three of them. Makers of song, of wood, of threaded patterns. Because they were artists, they had some value that she could not comprehend. Because of that value, the three of them were here, well fed, well housed, and nurtured.

She brushed her hair and teeth and got into bed. The window was open to the breeze. Below, she could see the half-completed constructions that would soon be her dyeing-garden, firepit, and shed. Across the room, through the darkness, she could see the folded, covered shape on top of her worktable: the Singer’s robe.

Suddenly Kira knew that although her door was unlocked, she was not really free. Her life was limited to these things and this work. She was losing the joy she had once felt when the bright-colored threads took shape in her hands, when the patterns came to her and were her own. The robe did not belong to her, though she was learning its story through her work. She would almost be able to tell the history now that it had passed through her fingers, now that she had focused on it so closely for so many days. But it was not what her hands or heart yearned to do.

Thomas, uncomplaining though he was, had mentioned the headaches that afflicted him after hours of work. So had the little singer below. *They be stuffing new things into me,* the tyke had whimpered. She wanted the freedom to sing her own songs as she always had.

Kira did too. She wanted her hands to be free of the robe so that they could make patterns of their own again. Suddenly she wished that she could leave this place, despite its comforts, and return to the life she had known.

She buried her face in the bedclothes and for the first time cried in despair.

Seventeen

"THOMAS, I'VE WORKED hard all morning, and you have too. Would you take a walk with me? There's something I want to see."

It was midday. They had both eaten lunch.

"You want to go down and look at what the workmen are doing? I'll go with you." Thomas set aside the carving tool he had just picked up. Kira noticed again, with admiration, how intricate the work was on the large Singer's staff. Thomas had been smoothing the tiny rough spots from the worn, ancient carvings and reshaping the infinitesimally small edges and curves. It was very similar to the work that Kira herself had been assigned, the repair of the Singer's robe. And the entire top of the staff was undecorated; it was smooth, uncarved wood, in the same way that the expanse across the shoulders of the robe was untouched cloth. Kira's work was approaching that unadorned expanse. So was Thomas's, she realized.

"What will you carve there?" she asked him, pointing to the undecorated part.

"I don't know. They said they'd tell me."

She watched as he carefully laid the staff across the table.

"Actually," she told him, "if you want to look at what the workmen are doing, I'll go there with you later. But that's not what I had in mind. Will you go with me first where *I* want?"

Thomas nodded good-naturedly. "Where's that?" he asked.

"The Fen," Kira told him.

He looked at her quizzically. "That filthy place? Why would you want to go there?"

"I've never been there. I want to see where Jo lived, Thomas."

"And Matt does still," he reminded her.

"Yes, Matt too. I wonder where he is, Thomas." Kira was uneasy. "I haven't seen him in two days. Have you?"

Thomas shook his head. "Maybe he found another source of food," he suggested, laughing.

"Matt could point out where Jo lived. Maybe I could even bring something back for her. Maybe she had toys. Did they let you bring things when you came here, Thomas?"

He shook his head. “Just my bits of wood. They didn’t want me distracted.”

Kira sighed. “She’s so small. She should have a toy. Maybe you could carve her a doll? And I could stitch a little dress for it.”

“I could, I guess,” Thomas agreed. He handed Kira her walking stick. “Let’s go,” he said. “We’ll probably find Matt along the way. Or he’ll find us.”

Together the pair made their way out of the Edifice, across the plaza, and down the crowded lane. At the weaving shed, Kira paused, greeted the women, and asked about Matt.

“Haven’t seen him! And good riddance, too!” one of the workers replied. “The useless scamp!”

“When’re you coming back, Kira?” another asked. “We could use your help. And you’re old enough to be on the looms now! With your mother gone, you must need the work!”

But another woman laughed loudly and pointed to Kira’s clean new clothes. “She don’t need us no more!”

The looms began to click and move again. Kira turned away.

Nearby, she heard an oddly familiar, oddly frightening sound. A low growl. Quickly she glanced around, half expecting to see a menacing dog or something worse. But the sound had come from a cluster of women near the butcher’s. They burst into laughter when they saw her looking. She saw Vandara in their midst. The scarred woman turned her back on Kira and she heard the growl again: a human imitation of a beast. Kira lowered her head and limped past them, ignoring the cruel laughter.

Thomas had gone ahead; she could see him far beyond the butcher’s. He had stopped near a group of young boys playing in the mud.

“Dunno!” one was saying as she approached. “Gimme coins and maybe I could find him!”

“I asked them about Matt,” Thomas explained, “but they say they haven’t seen him.”

“Do you suppose he might be sick?” Kira asked, worried. “His nose is always running. Maybe we should never have cleaned him up. He was accustomed to that layer of dirt.”

The boys, slapping their bare feet in the mud, were listening. “Matt’s the strongest of the strong!” one said. “He never be sick!”

A smaller one wiped his own runny nose on the back of his hand. “His mum be yelling at him. I heared her. And she throwed a rock at him too, and he laughed at it and run off!”

“When?” Kira asked the runny-nosed boy.

“Dunno,” he said. “Maybe two days ago.”

“It were!” chimed in another. “Two days ago! I seed it too. His mum chucked a rock at him ’cause he tooken some food! He said he were goin’ on a journey!”

“He’s all right, Kira,” Thomas reassured her, and they walked on. “He takes care of himself better than most adults. Here—I think this is where we turn.”

She followed him down an unfamiliar narrow lane. The huts were closer together here, and close to the edge of the woods, so that they were shaded by trees and smelled of dankness and rot. They came to a foul-smelling stream and crossed it by a slippery, primitive bridge of logs. Thomas took her hand and helped her; it was treacherous, with her bad leg, and she feared slipping into the water, which was quite shallow but clogged with filth.

On the other side of the stream, beyond the thick poisonous oleander bushes that were such a danger to tykes, lay the area known as the Fen. In some ways it was similar to the place that Kira had called home: the small cotts, close together; the incessant wailing of infants; the stench of smoky fires, rotting food, and unwashed humans. But it was darker here, with the trees thick overhead, and festering with dampness and an odor of ill health.

“Why must there be such a horrible place?” Kira whispered to Thomas. “Why do people have to live like this?”

“It’s how it is,” he replied, frowning. “It’s always been.”

A sudden vision slid into Kira’s mind. The robe. The robe told how it had always been; and what Thomas had said was not true. There had been times—oh, such long ago times—when people’s lives had been golden and green. Why could there not be such times again? She began to say it to him.

“Thomas,” she suggested, “you and I? We’re the ones who will fill in the blank places. Maybe we can make it different.”

But she saw how he was looking at her. His look was skeptical, amused.

“What are you talking about?” He didn’t understand. Perhaps he never would.

“Nothing,” Kira told him, shaking her head.

As they walked, an ominous quiet fell. Kira became aware of eyes. Women stood in shadowed doorways, watching them suspiciously. Kira limped along, trying to find ways around the garbage-strewn puddles in the path, and felt the hostile stares. It made no sense, she knew, to walk without a destination through this unfamiliar, malevolent place.

“Thomas,” she murmured, “we must ask someone.”

He stopped, and she stopped beside him. They stood uncertainly in the path.

“What be your purpose?” a hoarse voice called from an open window. Kira looked, and saw a green lizard slither into the vines at the sill; behind the fluttering wet leaves a gaunt-faced woman was holding a tyke in her arms and looking out. There seemed no men around. She realized the men, mostly draggers and diggers, would all be working, and she felt relieved, remembering how they had grabbed at her the day of the weapons.

Kira made her way through the thorny underbrush and went closer to the window. Through it, she could see the dark interior of the cott, where several other tykes, half-naked, stood staring dull-eyed and frightened toward her.

“I’m looking for the boy called Matt,” she said politely to the woman. “Do you know where he lives?”

“What you be giving me fer it?”

“Giving you? I’m sorry,” Kira told her, startled by the question. “I don’t have anything to give.”

“Nary food?”

“No. I’m sorry.” Kira held her hands out, showing that they were empty.

“I have an apple.” Thomas approached and to Kira’s surprise, took a dark red apple from his pocket. “I saved it from lunch,” he explained to Kira in a low voice, and he held it toward the woman.

Her thin arm reached out from the open window and grabbed the fruit. She bit at it and began to turn away.

“Wait!” Kira said. “The cott where Matt lives! Can you tell us, please?”

The woman turned back, her mouth full. “Further down,” she said, chewing noisily. The infant in her arms grabbed at the bitten apple, and she

shoved its hands away. She gestured with her head. “There be a busted tree in front.”

Kira nodded. “And please, one more thing,” she pleaded. “What can you tell us about a tyke named Jo?”

The woman’s face changed and Kira found it hard to interpret the look. For a moment, a brief flicker of joy had washed across the thin, embittered face. Then hopelessness replaced it.

“The little singing girl,” the woman said, her voice a hoarse whisper. “She be tooken. They tooken her away.”

She turned away abruptly and disappeared into the shadowed interior of the cott. Her children began to cry and to claw at her for food.

The gnarled tree was dying, split almost to the ground and rotting. Perhaps it had once borne fruit. But now its limbs were broken, dangling at odd angles, punctuated by occasional wisps of brown leaves.

The small cott behind the tree looked damaged and neglected too. But there were voices inside: a woman speaking roughly and a sharp-tongued child answering her in an angry, spiteful tone.

Thomas knocked. The voices became quiet and finally the door opened slightly.

“Who you be?” the woman asked abruptly.

“We’re friends of Matt’s,” Thomas told her. “Is he inside? Is he all right?”

“Who be it, Mum?” the child’s voice called.

The woman peered at Thomas and Kira silently, not answering. Finally Thomas called to the child, “Is Matt at home?”

“What’s he done now? What you be wanting him for?” the woman asked, her eyes glinting with mistrust.

“He runned off! And tooken food too!” A tyke called to them; his head, thick with tousled, unkempt hair, appeared beside the woman. He pushed the door open wider.

Kira looked in dismay at the cott’s dark interior. A pitcher, overturned on a table, lay in a puddle of some thick liquid through which insects crawled. The tyke at the door picked his nose with one finger, scratched himself with the other hand, and stared at them. His mother coughed wetly and then spat something to the floor.

“Do you know where he went?” Kira asked, trying not to show how shocked she felt at the condition of these people.

The woman shook her head and coughed again. “Good rid to him,” she said. She shoved the tyke to the side and pulled the heavy wooden door closed.

After a moment, Kira and Thomas turned away. Behind them, they heard the door open. “Miss? I know where Matt goed,” the tyke’s voice said. He emerged from the cott despite his mother’s scolding voice and came to them. He was clearly Matt’s brother. He had the same bright, mischievous eyes.

They waited.

“What you gimme?” His finger went into his nose again.

Kira sighed. Life in the Fen was apparently a series of barters. No wonder Matt had become such a clever manipulator and entrepreneur. She looked helplessly at Thomas.

“We don’t have anything to give you,” she explained to the tyke.

He eyed her appraisingly. “How about that there, miss?” he suggested, pointing to Kira’s neck. She touched the thong from which hung the polished stone.

“No,” she told the tyke, and her fingers curled protectively around the stone. “This was my mother’s. I can’t give it to you.”

To her surprise, he nodded as if that made sense to him. “That there, then?” He pointed to her hair. Kira remembered that she had tied it back that morning, as she often did, with a simple leather cord of no value. Quickly she pulled it loose and held it out.

The tyke grabbed it and thrust it into his pocket. It seemed to be a satisfactory payment. “Our mum, she thrashed Matt so hard he was horrid bloody, and so him and Branchie, they goed on a journey and they not be coming back, not to the Fen,” the tyke announced. “Matt, he got friends who be taking good care of him, not thrashing him *never!* And they give him food, too.”

Thomas laughed a little. “And they make him take baths,” he added, though the tyke just stared, not understanding the word.

“But he meant us!” Kira pointed out. “*We’re* the friends he meant!” She was concerned. “If he tried to come to us, where is he? It was two days ago that he left here, and no one’s seen him since. He knew the way to—”

Matt's brother interrupted her. "Him and Branchie, they goed someplace else first. He be getting a giftie for his friends. That be you, miss? And you?" He looked at Thomas.

They nodded.

"Matt, he say that a giftie makes a person like you best of all."

Kira sighed in exasperation. "No, that's not the way it is. A gift—" She gave up. "Never mind. Tell us where he went."

"He be getting you some *blue!*"

"Blue? What do you mean?"

"Dunno, miss. But Matt, he said it. He be saying they got blue yonder, and he be getting you some."

The woman reappeared in the open doorway and called in a shrill and angry voice to the tyke, who retreated inside. Thomas and Kira turned away and began to retrace their steps on the muddy path back toward the village. Silent watchers still lurked in doorways. The fetid air still hung humid.

Kira whispered to Thomas. "When Matt disappeared, I thought perhaps we would find that he had been taken too. Like Jo."

"If he'd been taken," Thomas suggested, "we'd know his whereabouts. He'd be there with us in the Council Edifice."

Kira nodded. "And with Jo. Although maybe they'd have locked him up, like her. He'd hate that."

"Matt would find a way to get free," Thomas pointed out. "Anyway," he added, helping Kira find her way around a puddle with a dead rat in it, "they wouldn't want Matt, I'm afraid. They only want us for our skills, and he hasn't any."

Kira thought of the impish boy, of his generosity and his laughter, of his devotion to the little dog. She thought of him now, wherever he was, on his quest to bring a gift to friends. "Oh, Thomas," she said, "he *does.* He knows just how to make us smile and laugh."

There seemed no hint of laughter or any history of it in this terrible place. Making her way through the squalor, Kira remembered Matt's infectious chortle. She thought, too, of the clear purity of the small singer's voice, and how the two children must have been the only elements of joy here. Now Jo had been taken away. And Matt was gone as well.

She wondered where he could have journeyed, all alone but for the dog, to search for blue.

Eighteen

THE DAY OF the Gathering was approaching. Its nearness was palpable in the village. People began to finish projects and delayed the start of new ones. Kira noticed that in the weaving shed fabrics were folded and stacked, but the looms were not restrung.

The noise level subsided, as if people were distracted with preparations and didn't want to waste time with the usual bickering.

Some people washed.

In his room, Thomas was meticulously polishing the Singer's staff again and again. He used thick oils and rubbed them into the wood with a soft cloth. Smooth and golden, it began to take on a glow and fragrance.

Matt did not return. It had been many days now since he had disappeared. At night, before she slept, Kira held the scrap of cloth that had so often assuaged her fears and even answered her questions. She wrapped it around her fingers and concentrated on Matt; she pictured the laughing boy and sought some feeling of where he might be and whether he was safe. A feeling of reassurance, of solace, came from the scrap. But no answer.

They could occasionally hear the voice of the small singer, Jo, during the day. The crying had ceased. Most often they heard repetitive chanting, the same phrases over and over, though sometimes, as if she were allowed a moment of her own, the high lyrical voice soared into melodies that made Kira hold her breath in awe.

She crept down at night with the key in her hand and visited the tyke. Jo had stopped asking for her mother, but she clung to Kira in the darkness. Together they whispered little stories and jokes. Kira brushed Jo's hair.

"I could thump with the hairbrush iffen I needed," Jo reminded her, looking up at the ceiling.

"Yes. And we would come." Kira stroked Jo's soft cheek.

"Want I should make a song for you?" Jo asked.

"Someday," Kira told her. "But not now. We mustn't make noise in the night. It must be our secret, that I come here."

"I be thinking up a song," Jo said. "And someday I sing it for you horrid loud."

“All right.” Kira laughed.

“The Gathering be soon,” Jo said importantly.

“Yes, I know.”

“I be right up front, they say.”

“Good for you! So you’ll be able to see everything. You’ll be able to see the beautiful Singer’s robe. I’ve been working on it,” Kira told her. “It has wonderful colors.”

“When I be Singer,” the tyke confided, “then I can make my own songs again. Iffen I learn the old ones good.”

When Jamison came to her room, Kira showed him that the repairs to the robe were complete. He was obviously pleased with her work. Together they spread the fabric across the table, turning it, unfolding its pleating and cuffs, examining the intricate stitches and the scenes they created.

“You’ve done a fine job, Kira,” he said. “Particularly here.”

He pointed to a place that she recalled had been difficult for her; though tiny in size, as each embroidered scene was, it was a complicated portrayal of tall buildings in shades of gray, each of them toppling, against a background of fiery explosions. Kira had matched oranges and reds of different shades and had found the various grays for the smoke and the buildings. But the threading had been hard for her because she had no sense of what the buildings were. She had never seen anything like them. The Council Edifice in which she lived and worked was the only large building she knew, and it was small compared to these. These, before they toppled, had seemed to extend up into the sky to amazing heights, much, much higher than any tree she had ever seen.

“That was the hardest part,” she told Jamison. “It was so complicated. Perhaps if I had known more about the buildings, about what happened to them—”

She was embarrassed. “I should have paid more attention to the Ruin Song each year,” she confessed. “I was always so excited when it began, but then my mind would wander a bit, and I didn’t always listen carefully.”

“You were young,” Jamison reminded her, “and the Song is very, very long. No one listens carefully to every part, and especially not the tykes.”

“This year I will!” Kira told him. “This year I’ll be paying special attention because I know the scenes so well. I’ll be listening especially for this scene, with the buildings falling.”

Jamison closed his eyes. She could see his lips move silently. He started to hum, and she recognized a recurrent melody from part of the Song. Then he began to chant aloud:

Burn, scourged world,

Furious furnace,

Inferno impure—

He opened his eyes. “I believe that’s the part,” he said. “It goes on and on after that—I forget the next words—but I believe that’s the part where the buildings toppled. Of course I’ve listened to the Song for many more years than you.”

“I can’t imagine how the Singer remembers it all,” Kira said. For a moment she thought of asking him about the captive child below, the Singer of the future, who was being forced to learn the interminable Song. But she hesitated, and the moment passed.

“Of course he has the staff as a guide,” Jamison said. “And he began the learning when he was just a small tyke. That was a very long time ago. And he rehearses constantly. While you’ve been preparing his robe, he’s been preparing this year’s Song. The words are always the same, of course, but I believe he decides, each year, to emphasize certain parts. He studies all year, planning and rehearsing the singing of it.”

“Where?”

“He has special quarters in a different section of the Edifice.”

“I’ve never seen him except at the time of the Song.”

“No. He stays apart.”

They turned again to the robe, examining each section to be certain that Kira had missed nothing. A tender brought tea and they sat together, talking of the robe and its stories, of the history it told, of the time before the Ruin. Jamison closed his eyes again and recited.

Ravaged all,

Bogo tabal

Timore toron

Totoo now gone . . .

Kira recognized the lines, some of her favorites, though she didn't understand them. As a tyke the rhyming sounds had charmed her out of the boredom she often felt during the interminable Song. "Bogo tabal, timore toron," she had chanted to herself at times.

"What does it mean, that section?" she asked Jamison now.

"I believe it tells the names of lost places," he explained.

"I wonder what those places looked like. *Timore toron.* I like the sounds."

"That's part of your job," Jamison reminded her. "You use the threads to remind us of how they looked."

Kira nodded and smoothed the robe again, finding the tragic toppling cities and the interspersed meadows of soft greens.

Jamison set his teacup on the table, went to the window, and looked down. "The workers are finished. After the Gathering and this year's Song, you'll be able to start dyeing new threads for the robe."

She looked up, dismayed, hoping to see by his expression that he was making a small joke. But his look was solemn. Kira had thought that when this work was complete she could turn to her own projects, to some of the elaborate patterns that she could feel and see in her mind. Sometimes her fingers quivered with the desire to make those scenes. "Will the robe become so damaged during the Song that it will need repairing again?" she asked him, trying not to show how distressing the thought was to her. She wanted to please him. He had been her protector. But she didn't want to keep doing this forever.

"No, no." His voice was reassuring. "Your mother kept up with the small repairs each year. And now you've very capably redone the places that needed restoration. After this year's Song there will probably be only a few scattered broken threads for you to fix."

"Then—?" Kira was puzzled.

Jamison reached toward the robe and gestured at the empty unadorned expanse across the shoulders. "Here lies the future," he said.

"And now you will tell it to us, with your fingers and your threads," he told her. His eyes had a piercing, excited look.

She tried to conceal her shock. “So soon?” she murmured. He had referred to this enormous task before. But she had thought that when she was older—when she had more skill—more knowledge—

“We have waited a long time for you,” he said, and looked at her firmly as if he dared her to refuse.

Nineteen

IT BEGAN EARLY. At dawn Kira could hear the sounds, even from her room on the opposite side of the building, as the people started to gather. Quickly she finished dressing, pulled the brush through her hair, and ran to Thomas's room on the other side of the corridor. From there they could look down at the plaza where all large gatherings took place.

Unlike the day of the hunt, this crowd was subdued. Even small tykes, usually so unruly, clung to their mothers' hands and waited quietly. The sound that had awakened Kira was not shouts and jostling but simply the tread of feet as the people streamed up the narrow lanes and moved into the throng waiting to enter the building. From the Fen path came a steady flow of silent citizens clutching and leading their tykes. From the opposite direction, from the area where Kira and her mother had lived, came others whom she recognized from her old neighborhood. There was her mother's widowed brother with his boy, Dan, but the small girl, Mar, was not with him; perhaps she had been given away.

On a typical day, families were scattered and apart, tykes scampering unsupervised, parents at work; but today hubbies stood with their wives and tykes with their families. The people seemed solemn and expectant.

"Where's the staff?" Kira asked, looking around Thomas's room.

"They took it yesterday."

Kira nodded. They had come and taken the robe yesterday as well. Weary though she was of the work, her room seemed diminished with it gone.

"Should we go down?" she asked him, though she didn't relish the prospect of joining the crowd.

"No, they said they'd come for us. I asked the tender who brought my breakfast.

"Look!" Thomas pointed. "Over there, way in the back. See, by the tree just before the weaving shed? Isn't that Matt's mother?"

Kira followed his pointing finger with her eyes and found the same gaunt woman who had eyed them suspiciously from the squalor of the cott. Today she was washed and tidy; beside her, holding her hand, was the tyke who looked so much like Matt. The two stood waiting as a family. But

there was no second child. No Matt. A wave of sorrow swept through Kira, a feeling of loss.

Looking down at the sea of faces, Kira gradually recognized people here and there: the weaving women, separate from each other, each with a hubby and children; the butcher, clean for a change, with his large wife and two tall sons. The entire village had gathered now, only a few stragglers still hurrying up the lanes.

A small surge of movement began and she could see that the people were shuffling forward. The crowd rippled like water moving on the riverbank when a log floated by.

“The doors must have been opened,” Thomas said, leaning forward to see.

They watched as the entire village, person by person, entered the building. Finally, when the crowd outside was almost entirely gone—and now they could hear the murmur of voices and the shuffle of footsteps from below, inside the building—a tender appeared in Thomas’s doorway and beckoned.

“It’s time,” the tender said.

Except for a quick peek through a cracked-open door when she looked for Jamison one afternoon, Kira had not seen inside the Council of Guardians hall since the day of her trial months before. The circumstances had been so different then, when she entered the cavernous room and limped alone down its central aisle hungry, lonely, and fearful for her life.

Today she still leaned, as she had that day, on her stick. But now she was clean, healthy, and unafraid. Today she and Thomas were brought through a side entrance near the front, so that they saw the faces of the village watching them.

The tender pointed, directing them to a row of three wooden chairs on the left, just below the stage, facing the audience. Kira could see that there was another, longer row of chairs on the opposite side, and she recognized the Council of Guardians members who were already seated there. Jamison was among them.

Quickly, reminding herself of the custom, she bowed her head toward the Worship-object on the stage. Then she followed Thomas, and together they took their places in two of the chairs. A murmur passed through the audience and Kira felt her face flush in embarrassment. She didn’t like

being singled out. She didn't want to sit here at the front. She remembered the derisive voice of one of the weavers only a few days before. "She don't need us no more!" the woman had called.

It's not true. I need all of you. We need each other.

Gazing at the crowded audience, Kira remembered the many past years when she had come dutifully with her mother to the Gathering. Always they sat in the back where she couldn't see or hear, and she had endured the event bored and restless, sometimes kneeling on her seat to try to peer around the spectators' shoulders and get a glimpse of the Singer. Her mother, she remembered, had always been attentive and had gently restrained her when she wriggled in the seat. But the Gathering and the Song were long and difficult for tykes.

The people in the crowded audience, who though respectful had been shifting in their seats and whispering, quieted completely when Kira and Thomas entered and took their places. Everyone waited. Finally, in the silence, the four-syllable chief guardian, whom Kira had not seen since the trial and whose name she still could not recall (was it Bartholemew, perhaps?), rose from his seat on the other side. He walked to the space at the front of the stage and began the ritual that always opened the ceremony.

"The Gathering begins," he announced.

"We worship the Object," he said, gesturing toward the stage, and bowing. The entire audience bowed respectfully toward the little crossed construction of wood.

"I present the Council of Guardians," he said next, and nodded to the row of men which included Jamison. As a group, they stood. For a nervous moment Kira couldn't remember if the spectators were supposed to applaud. But a hush had fallen and the crowd was silent, though some heads seemed to nod toward the Council of Guardians in respect.

"For the first time I present the Carver of the future." He gestured toward Thomas, who looked uncertain.

"Stand," Kira whispered under her breath, knowing intuitively that it was the proper thing to do. Thomas stood awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other. Again, heads nodded in respect. He sat back down.

She knew that she would be next, and she reached for her stick, which was leaning against the chair.

“For the first time I present the Robe-threader, the designer of the future.”

Kira stood as straight as she could and acknowledged the nods in her direction. She sat again.

“For the first time, I present the Singer of the future. One day she will wear the robe.”

The eyes of the villagers all turned to the side door, which had opened. Kira could see two tenders push Jo forward, pointing to the unoccupied chair. The tyke, dressed in a new but simple and unadorned gown, looked confused and uncertain, but her eyes found Kira’s and Kira beckoned to her, smiling. Jo grinned and hurried forward toward the chair.

“Don’t sit yet,” Kira whispered. “Stand and look at the people. Be proud.”

With a shy grin, with one foot nervously rubbing the ankle of the other leg, the Singer of the future stood and faced the crowd. Her smile, hesitant at first, quickly became both self-confident and infectious. Kira could see the people smile back.

“Now you can sit,” Kira whispered.

“Wait,” Jo whispered back. She raised one hand and waggled her fingers at the audience. A ripple of gentle laughter ran through the large crowd.

Then Jo turned and hoisted her small self, knees first, onto the chair. “I be giving them a little wavie,” she confided to Kira.

“Finally, I present our Singer, who wears the robe,” the chief guardian announced, when the people had quieted.

The Singer, wearing the magnificent robe and holding the carved staff in his right hand, entered from the other side. The crowd gasped collectively. Of course they saw him, and the robe, each year. But this year was different because of the work that Kira had done on the ancient embroidery. As the Singer moved toward the stage, the folds of the robe glistened in the torchlight; the colors of the threaded scenes glowed in their subtlety. Golds, light yellows deepening to vibrant orange, reds from the palest pink to the darkest crimson, greens, all shades, threaded in their intricate patterns, told the history of the world and its Ruin. As he turned to mount the few stairs to the stage, Kira could see the broad blank expanse across the Singer’s back and shoulders, the blank that she had been picked to fill. The future that she had been chosen to create.

“What’s that noise?” Thomas murmured.

Kira had been distracted by her awareness and appreciation of the robe and all that it meant. But now she heard it too: a dull, intermittent metallic noise, a muted clank. Now it was gone. There; she heard it again. A scraping clank.

"I don't know," she whispered back.

The Singer turned, at the center of the stage, after bowing slightly to the Worship-object, and now faced the audience. He fingered the staff like a talisman but did not need its guidance yet. His face was impassive, expressionless. Then he closed his eyes and began to breathe deeply.

The mysterious sound had disappeared. Kira listened carefully, but the muted scrape had subsided. Looking at Thomas, she shrugged and settled back to listen. She glanced at Jo and could see that the tyke's eyes were closed too, and she was forming the first words silently with her mouth.

The Singer held up one arm, and Kira, from her knowledge of the robe, knew that he was displaying the sleeve with the scene of the world's origin: the separation of land and sea, the emergence of fish and birds, all of it in the tiniest stitches around the border of the left sleeve, aloft now with his arm outstretched. She could feel the awed admiration of the audience as they saw the robe displayed for the first time in a year, and she felt pride in the work she had done.

He started in a strong, rich baritone voice. No melody, yet, really. The Song began with a chant. Gradually, melodies would enter, Kira recalled; some slow, soaring lyrical phrases, followed by other harsher phrases with a quick pulsating beat. But it emerged slowly, as the world had. The Song began with the origin of the world, so many centuries before:

"*In the beginning . . .*"

Twenty

THOMAS NUDGED HER and gestured with his head. Kira glanced over and smiled to see Jo, so eager and squirming earlier, now sound asleep in the big chair.

It was late morning and the Song had continued for several hours. Probably many of the tykes in the large hall were dozing, as Jo was.

Kira was surprised not to be bored and drowsy herself. But for her, the Song was also a journey through the patterned folds, and as the Singer sang, holding up the related parts, she remembered each scene and the days of work, the search through Annabella's threads for exactly the right shades. Though she remained attentive, occasionally her mind wandered to her own task that loomed ahead. Now that the old dyer's threads were almost gone—and the woman herself was gone too—Kira found herself desperately hoping that she would be able to remember and to create the dyes alone. Thomas drilled her again and again from his written pages.

Though Kira had told no one, not even Thomas, she had realized recently, to her surprise, that she could read many of the words. Watching his finger on the page one day, she had noticed that *goldenrod* and *greenwood* began the same way, with a looping downward curve. And they ended the same way too, with a little twiglike upright line. It was like a game, to find the marks that made the sounds. A forbidden game to be sure, but Kira found herself puzzling over it often when Thomas wasn't watching, and the puzzles had begun to explain themselves to her.

The Singer was in a quiet section now, one of those times following a great world disaster in which ice—white and gray sheets of it, made with small stitches so that it had no texture but instead an eerie, glistening smoothness—had engulfed the villages. Kira saw ice very seldom, only occasionally in the very coldest months when sleet struck the village, breaking tree branches, and the river froze near its banks. But she had remembered the fearsomeness and destruction of it when she worked on that section and had felt glad when beyond the edges of the ice disaster, green seeped in again and a quiet, fruitful time ensued.

He slid into the singing of the green part now, melodic and soothing, a relief after the frigid destruction that had made his voice harsh and

forbidding.

Thomas leaned over and nudged her again. She glanced at Jo but the tyke had not moved. “Look down the aisle on the right,” Thomas whispered.

She did, and saw nothing.

“Keep watching,” Thomas murmured.

The Singer’s voice continued. Kira watched the side aisle. Suddenly she saw it: something moving stealthily, slowly, stopping now and then, and waiting; then creeping forward again.

People’s heads blocked her view. Kira leaned slightly to the right, trying to see around them, trying not to let the Council of Guardians know that something disruptive was happening. She glanced at them but they were all attentive and focused on the Singer.

It moved again in the shadows, and she could see now that it was human, a small human, on all fours like a stalking beast. She could see too that people sitting on the edge of the aisle were beginning to notice, though they kept their eyes toward the stage. There was a very small stir; shoulders turning slightly, quick glances, expressions of surprise. The small human crept forward again, inching stealthily closer to the first row.

As he approached, it was easier for Kira to watch without changing her position, since her chair faced the audience, away from the stage. Finally, as the intruder reached the edge of the first row, he stopped creeping, squatted, and looked forward toward the stage—toward Kira, Jo, and Thomas—with a grin. Kira’s heart leaped.

Matt! She didn’t dare to speak aloud but she mouthed the word silently.

He wiggled his fingers in a wave.

The Singer inched his fingers up the staff, feeling for the place, and continued.

Matt grinned and opened one hand to show her something. But the light was dim; Kira didn’t recognize what he held. He held it up between his thumb and finger, displaying it to her importantly. She shook her head slightly, indicating that she couldn’t tell what it was. Then, feeling guilty at her lapse in attention, she turned and began to watch the stage and the Singer again. Soon, she knew, there would be an intermission—a break for lunch. She would figure out a way to catch up with the tyke then, and examine and admire whatever he had brought.

Kira listened to the Singer's voice as he sang the serene melody of plentiful harvests and celebratory feasting. This part of the Song coincided with her own feelings at the moment. She experienced an enormous sense of relief and joy, now that Matt had returned and was safe.

When she looked back, he had crept away again, and the aisle was empty.

"May the little Singer have lunch with Thomas and me?"

It was the midday interruption of the Gathering, a lengthy gap in the day for food and rest. The tender pondered Kira's question and agreed. Leaving by the side door through which they had entered, Kira and Thomas, accompanied by Jo, yawning, went up the stairs to Kira's room and waited for their food to be brought. On the plaza outside, the people would be eating the food they had brought with them and discussing the Song. They would be anticipating the next section, a time of warfare, conflict, and death. Kira remembered it: the bright splatters of blood in crimson threads. But she put it out of her mind now.

While Thomas and Jo began on the large lunch that appeared on a tray, she hurried across the hall to Thomas's room to look down from the window and scan the crowd for a dirty-faced tyke and a bent-tailed dog.

But there was no need to search from the window. They were waiting for her in Thomas's room.

"Matt!" Kira cried. She set her stick aside, sat on the bed, and took him into her arms. Branch danced at her feet, his eager nose and tongue damp on her ankles.

"I been on a horrid long journey," Matt told her proudly.

She sniffed and smiled. "And you never washed, not *once*, while you were gone."

"There be no time for washing," he scoffed.

"I brung you a giftie," he told her eagerly, his eyes dancing with excitement.

"What was it that you held up at the Gathering? I couldn't see it."

"I brung you two things. A big and a little. The big be coming still. But I gots the little here in my pockie." He dug one hand deep into his pocket and pulled out a handful of nuts and a dead grasshopper.

"Nope. Be the other side." Matt put the grasshopper on the floor for Branch, who grabbed it with his teeth and consumed it with a crunch that

made Kira cringe. The nuts rolled under the bed. Matt plunged his hand into the opposite pocket and brought out something triumphantly.

"Here you be!" He handed the thing to her.

She took the folded thing curiously and plucked the dead leaf pieces and dirt away. Then, while Matt watched with delight and pride suffusing his face, she unfolded it and held it to the window light. A square of filthy, wrinkled cloth. Nothing more. And yet it was everything.

"Matt!" Kira said, her voice hushed with awe. "You found blue!"

He beamed. "It were there, where she said."

"Where who said?"

"She. The old woman who makened the colors. She said there be blue yonder." He wiggled in excitement.

"Annabella? Yes, I remember. She *did* say that." Kira smoothed the cloth on the table, examining it. The deep blue was rich and even. The color of sky, of peace. "But how did you know where, Matt? How did you know where to go?"

He shrugged, grinning. "I recollect she pointed. I just followed where her point went. There be a path. But it's horrid far."

"And dangerous, Matt! It's through the woods!"

"There be nought fearful in the woods."

There be no beasts, Annabella had said.

"Me and Branchie, we walk for days and days. Branch, he et bugs. And me, I had some food I tooken—"

"—from your mother."

He nodded, with a guilty look. "But it weren't enough. After it be all gone, I et nuts, mostly.

"I could've et bugs if I had to," he added, boasting.

Kira half listened to his tale as she continued to smooth the cloth in her hand. She had yearned so for blue. Now here it was, in her grasp.

"Then when I got to the place, them people, they give me food. They got lots."

"But not a bath," Kira teased.

Matt scratched his dirty knee with dignity and ignored her. "They was horrid surprised to see me come. But they give me plenty of food. Branchie too. They liked Branchie."

Kira looked down at the dog, asleep now at her feet, and nudged him affectionately with the tip of her sandal. "Of course they did. Everybody

loves Branch. But, Matt—”

“What?”

“Who are they? The people who have blue?”

He lifted his thin shoulders and wrinkled his forehead in an expression of ignorance. “Dunno,” he said. “Them be all broken, them people. But there be plenty of food. And it’s quiet-like, and nice.”

“What do you mean, broken?”

He gestured toward her twisted leg. “Like you. Some don’t walk good. Some be broken in other ways. Not all. But lots. Do you think it maken them quiet and nice, to be broken?”

Puzzled by his description, Kira didn’t answer. *Pain makes you strong*, her mother had told her. She had not said *quiet*, or *nice.*

“Anyways,” Matt went on, “them got blue, for certain sure.”

“For certain sure,” Kira repeated.

“I suppose you like me best now, aye?” He grinned at her, and she laughed and said she liked him best of all.

Matt pulled away from her, and went to the window. On tiptoe he peered down and then out. The crowds were still there but he seemed to be looking beyond them for something. He frowned.

“You like the blue?” he asked her.

“Matt,” she said passionately, “I love the blue. Thank you.”

“It be the small giftie. But the big one be coming soon,” he told her. He continued watching through the window. “Not yet, though.”

He turned to her. “Got food?” he asked. “Iffen I wash?”

They left Matt and Branch in Thomas’s room when they were summoned back to the afternoon section of the Gathering. This time they were ushered in and took their seats with less formality; there was no need for the chief guardian to introduce them to the villagers.

But the Singer, looking refreshed after lunch and a rest, made a ceremonial entrance again. He held his Staff as he stood at the foot of the stage, and the audience applauded him in acknowledgement of his remarkable performance in the morning. His expression didn’t change. It had not changed all day. No proud smile. He simply stood gazing with intensity at the populace, the people for whom the Song was an entire history, the story of their upheavals, failures, and mistakes, as well as the

telling of new tries and hopes. Kira and Thomas applauded as well, and Jo, watching and imitating them, clapped her hands enthusiastically.

Through the noise of the applause, as the Singer turned and mounted the stairs to the stage, Kira glanced at Thomas. He had heard it too. The dull, dragging sound of metal. The same sound they had noticed in the morning before the Song began.

Kira looked around, puzzled. No one else seemed to notice the abrupt, heavy noise. The villagers were watching the Singer as he breathed deeply in preparation. He moved to the center of the stage, closed his eyes, and fingered the Staff, looking for the place. He swayed slightly.

There! She had heard it again. Then, almost by accident, just for a second, she glimpsed it. Suddenly Kira realized with horror what the sound was. But now there was only silence. And then the start of the Song.

Twenty-one

"WHAT'S WRONG, KIRA? Tell me!" Thomas was following her up the stairs. The Gathering had finally ended. Jo had been led away by tenders but not before she had had an exhilarating moment of triumph.

At the end of the long afternoon, when the audience stood and sang, in chorus with the Singer, the magnificent "Amen. So be it" that always formed the Song's conclusion, the Singer himself had beckoned to little Jo. Though the tyke had wriggled and dozed during the long hours, now she looked up at him with eagerness, and when it was clear that he was summoning her to join him, she scrambled down from her chair and ran enthusiastically to the stage. She stood by his side and beamed with satisfaction, waving one small arm in the air, while the people, released now from their solemnity, whistled and stamped their feet in appreciation.

Kira, watching, remained motionless and silent, overwhelmed with her new knowledge and a heavy feeling that combined dread and terrible sorrow.

That fear and sadness stayed with her as she limped laboriously upstairs and Thomas urged her to explain what was wrong. She took a deep breath and prepared herself to tell him what she knew.

But at the top of the staircase, they were interrupted by the sight of Matt in the corridor outside Kira's open door. He was grinning broadly and dancing impatiently from foot to foot.

"It's here!" Matt called. "The big giftie!"

Kira entered the room and stopped just inside the door. She stared curiously at the stranger who sat slumped wearily in her chair. She could tell from his long legs that the man was quite tall. There was gray in his hair, though he was not old; three syllables, she thought, trying to categorize him in some way that would perhaps explain his presence. Yes, three syllables, about the same as Jamison; maybe the age of her mother's brother, she decided.

She nudged Thomas. "Look," she whispered, indicating the color of the man's loose shirt. *"Blue."*

The intruder stood and turned toward her at the sound of her voice and at the continued bursts of Matt's barely-contained excitement. Kira wondered briefly why he had not risen when she entered. It would have been the expected gesture for even the most inconsiderate or hostile stranger, and this man appeared to be both friendly and courteous. He was smiling slightly. But now she could see, to her distress, that he was blind. Scars crossed and disfigured his face with jagged lines across his forehead and down the length of one cheek, and his eyes were opaque and unseeing. She had never seen anyone with destroyed vision before, though she had heard of such things happening through accident or disease. But damaged people were useless; they were always taken to the Field.

Why was this sightless man alive? Where had Matt found him?

And why was he here?

Matt was still prancing about with anticipation. "I brung him!" he announced gleefully. He touched the man's hand and demanded confirmation. "I brung you, didn't I?"

"You did," the man said, and his voice was affectionate toward the tyke. "You were a wonderful guide. You brought me almost all the way."

"I brung him all the way from yonder!" Matt said, turning to Kira and Thomas. "But then at the end he wanted to feel his way alone. I be telling him he can keep Branchie for a helper, but he want to do it all alone. So he gimme the scrap for the first giftie. See?" Matt pulled at the man's shirt and showed Kira the hem, at the back, from which he had torn the piece of cloth.

"I'm sorry," Kira said politely to the man. She felt awkward and uncertain in his presence. "Your shirt is ruined."

"I have others," the man said with a smile. "He wanted so badly to show you the gift. And I felt a need to find my way by myself. I have been here before, but it was a long time ago."

"And look!" Matt was like a toddler or a puppy, dashing about in excitement. He picked up a bag from the floor beside the chair and pulled its drawstring open. "Now we be needing some water," he said, lifting several wilted plants out gently, "but these be all right. They be perking up when we give them a drinkie.

"But you never be guessing what!" Now he turned to the blind man again and tugged at his sleeve to be certain he was paying attention.

"What?" The man seemed amused.

“She gots water right here! You probably be thinking we gotta take these plants to the river! But right here, iffen I open this door, she gots water that squirts out!”

He pranced to the door and opened it.

“Take the plants, then, Matt,” the man suggested, “and give them their drink.”

He turned toward Kira and she could tell that he knew how to feel her presence in his darkness. “It’s woad we’ve brought you,” he explained. “It’s the plant that my people use to make blue dye.”

“Your beautiful shirt,” she murmured, and he smiled again.

“Matt told me that it’s the same shade as the sky on a sunny summer-start morning,” he said.

Kira agreed. “Yes,” she said. “That’s it, exactly!”

“Much the same as the blossom on a morning glory vine, I would think,” the man said.

“Yes, that’s true! But how—”

“I haven’t always been sightless. I remember those things.”

They could hear the sound of running water. “Matt? Don’t drown them!” the man called. “It would be a very long trip back to get more!”

He turned back to Kira. “I would be happy to bring more, of course. But I think you won’t need that.”

“Please,” Kira said, “sit down. And we’ll have a meal sent up. It’s time for dinner anyway.” Even in her confusion, she tried to remember the basic courtesies. The man had brought her a gift of great value. Why he had done it, she couldn’t begin to comprehend. Nor how hard it must have been to come a great distance with no eyes and no guide but a lively boy and a bent-tailed dog.

And at the last of the journey, when Matt had run ahead with his treasured scrap of blue, the blind man had come alone. How was it possible?

“I’ll call the tenders and tell them,” Thomas said.

The man looked startled and concerned. “Who’s that?” he asked, hearing Thomas’s voice for the first time.

“I live down the hall,” Thomas explained. “I carved the Singer’s staff while Kira did the Robe. Maybe you don’t understand about the Gathering, but it’s just ended, and it’s a really impor—”

“I know about it,” the man said. “I know all about it.

“Please. Don’t call for food,” he added firmly. “No one must know that I’m here.”

“Food?” Matt asked, emerging from the bathroom.

“I’ll have them bring our dinners to my room down the hall, and no one will know,” Thomas suggested. “We’ll all share it. There’s always more than enough.”

Kira nodded agreement, and Thomas left the room to summon the tenders. Matt scampered behind him, alert to the prospect of food.

Now Kira found herself alone with the stranger in the blue shirt. She could tell from his posture that he was very tired. She sat down, facing him, on the edge of the bed and sought in her mind the right things to say to him, the right questions to ask.

“Matt’s a good boy,” she said after a moment’s silence, “but he forgets some important things in his excitement. He didn’t tell you my name. I’m Kira.”

The blind man nodded. “I know. He told me all about you.”

She waited. Finally, into the quiet, she said, “He didn’t tell me who you are.”

The man stared with his unseeing eyes into the room, beyond the place where Kira sat. He began to speak, faltered, took a breath, then stopped.

“It’s beginning to get dark,” he said finally. “I’m facing the window, and I can feel the change in daylight.”

“Yes.”

“It’s how I found my way here after Matt left me at the edge of the village. We had planned to wait and arrive at night, in the darkness. But there were no people about, so it was safe for us to enter in daylight. Matt realized it was the day of the Gathering.”

“Yes,” Kira said. “It began very early in the morning.” *He is not going to answer my question,* she thought.

“I remember the Gatherings. And I remembered the path. The trees have grown, of course. But I could feel the shadows. I could feel my way along the center of the path by the way the light fell.”

He smiled wryly. “I could smell the butcher’s hut.”

Kira nodded and chuckled.

“And when I passed the weaving shed, I could smell the fabrics folded there, and even the wood of the looms.

“If the women had been at work, I would have recognized the sounds.” With his tongue against the roof of his mouth, he made the repetitive muted clacking sound of the shuttle, and then the whisper of the threads turning into cloth.

“And so I made my way here all alone. Matt met me then and brought me to your room.”

Kira waited. Then she asked, “Why?”

As she watched, he touched his own face. He ran his hand over the scars, feeling the edges; then he followed the jagged skin down the side of his own cheek, along his neck. Finally he reached into his blue shirt and pulled forward the leather thong that hung there. As he held it in his hand, she saw the polished half-rock that matched her own.

“Kira,” he said, but he did not need to tell her now, because she knew, “my name is Christopher. I’m your father.”

In shock, she stared at him. She watched his ruined eyes, and saw that they were able, still, to weep.

Twenty-two

IN SOME HIDDEN place to which Matt had led him in the night, her father slept. But before he had left her in order to sleep, he had told her his story.

"No, it was not beasts," he said, in reply to her first questions. "It was men.

"There are no beasts out there," he said. His voice was as certain as Annabella's had been. *There be no beasts.*

"But—" Kira began to interrupt, to tell her father what Jamison had told her. *I saw your father taken by beasts,* Jamison had said. But she waited and continued to listen.

"Oh, there are wild creatures in the forest, of course. We hunted them for food. We still do. Deer. Squirrel. Rabbit." He sighed. "It was a large hunt that day. The men had gathered for the distribution of weapons. I had a spear and a sack of food. Katrina had prepared food for me. She always did."

"Yes, I know," Kira whispered.

He seemed not to hear her. With his blank eyes he seemed to be looking backward in time. "She was expecting a child," he said, smiling. He gestured with his hand, making a curve in the air above his own belly. In a dreamlike way, Kira felt herself, small, inside the curve made by his arched fingers, inside the memory of her mother.

"We went in the usual way: together at first, in groups, then separating into pairs, and eventually finding ourselves alone as we followed tracks or sounds deeper into the forest."

"Were you frightened?" Kira asked.

He shook himself loose from the slow measured speech of his memory, and smiled. "No, no. There was no danger. I was an accomplished hunter. One of the best. I was never frightened in the forest."

Then his brow furrowed. "I should have been wary, though. I knew that I had enemies. There were jealousies, always, and there were rivals. It was a way of life here. Perhaps it still is."

Kira nodded. Then she remembered that he couldn't see her acknowledgment. "Yes," she told him. "It still is."

“I was soon to be appointed to the Council of Guardians,” he went on. “It was a job with great power. Others wanted the post. I suppose it was that. Who knows? There was always hostility here. Harsh words. I haven’t thought about it in a long time, but now I recall the arguments and anger—even that morning, when the weapons were assigned—”

Kira told him, “It happened again recently, at the beginning of a hunt. I saw it. Fights and arguing. It’s always that way. It’s the way of men.”

He shrugged. “So it hasn’t changed.”

“How could it change? It’s the way it is. It’s what tykes are taught, to grab and shove. It’s the only way people can get what they want. I would have been taught that way too, but for my leg,” Kira said.

“Your leg?”

He didn’t know. How could he?

Now she felt embarrassed, having to tell him. “It’s twisted. I was born that way. They wanted to take me to the Field but my mother said no.”

“She defied them? Katrina?” His face lit and he smiled. “And she won!”

“Her father was still alive, and he was a person of great importance, she told me. And so they let her keep me. They probably thought I would die anyway.”

“But you were strong.”

“Yes. Mother said pain made me strong.” Telling him, she was no longer embarrassed, but proud, and she wanted him to be proud, too.

He reached out, and she took his hand.

She wanted him to go on. She needed to know what had happened. She waited.

“I don’t know for certain who it was,” he explained when he continued. “I can guess, of course. I knew he was bitterly envious. Apparently he approached silently behind me, and as I waited there, watching for the deer I’d been stalking, he attacked me; first with a club to my head, so that I was stunned and dazed, and then with his knife. He left me for dead.”

“But you lived. You were strong.” Kira squeezed his hand.

“I woke in the Field. I suppose draggers had taken me there and left me, as they do. You’ve been to the Field?”

Kira nodded, then remembered his blindness again, and said it aloud. “Yes.” She would have to tell him when and why. But not yet.

“I would have died there, as I was supposed to. I couldn’t move, couldn’t see. I was dazed and in great pain. I *wanted* to die.

“But that night,” he went on, “strangers came to the Field.

“I thought at first that it was diggers. I tried to tell them that I was still alive. But when they spoke, it was with the voice of strangers. They used our language, but with a different lilt, a slight change of cadence. Even as desperately wounded as I was, I could hear the difference. And their voices were soothing. Gentle. They held something to my mouth, a drink made of herbs. It dulled my pain and made me sleepy. They placed me on a carrying litter they had made of thick branches—”

“Who were they?” Kira asked, fascinated, unable to keep from interrupting.

“I didn’t know. I couldn’t see them. My eyes were destroyed and I was almost delirious with pain. But I could hear their comforting voices. So I drank the liquid and gave myself up to their care.”

Kira was astonished. In her entire lifetime in the village, she had never encountered a single person who would have done such a thing. She knew no one who would be willing to soothe or comfort or aid a grievously wounded being. Or who would know *how.*

Except Matt, she thought, remembering how the boy had nursed his little damaged dog back to life.

“They carried me a very great distance through the forest,” her father went on. “It took several days. I woke and slept and woke again. Each time I woke, they talked to me, cleaned me, gave me water to drink, and more of the drug to ease my pain.

“Everything was blurred. I didn’t remember what had happened or why. But they healed me, as much as I could be healed, and they told me the truth: I would never see again. But they told me also that they would help me to make a life without sight.”

“But who *were* they?” Kira asked again.

“Who *are* they, you should say,” he told her gently, “because they still exist. And I am one of them now.

“They were just people. But they are people like me, who were damaged. Who had been left to die.”

“Who had been taken from our village to the Field?”

Her father smiled. “Not only from here. There are other places. They had come from all over, those who had been wounded—sometimes not just in body, but in other ways as well. Some traveled very long distances. It’s astounding to hear of the difficult journeys.

“And those who had reached this place where I found myself? They had formed their own community—my community now, too—”

Kira remembered what Matt had described, a place where broken people lived.

“They help each other,” her father explained simply. “*We* help each other.

“Those who can see? They guide me. I am never without helping eyes.

“Those who can’t walk? They are carried.”

Kira unconsciously rubbed her own damaged leg.

“There is always someone to lean on,” he told her. “Or a pair of strong hands for those who have none.

“The village of the healing has existed for a long time,” he explained. “Wounded people still come. But now it is beginning to change, because children have been born there and are growing up. So we have strong, healthy young people among us. And we have others who have found us and stayed because they wanted to share our way of life.”

Kira was trying to picture it. “So it is a village, like this one?”

“Much the same. We have gardens. Houses. Families. But it is much quieter than this village. There is no arguing. People share what they have, and help each other. Babies rarely cry. Children are cherished.”

Kira looked at the stone pendant that rested against his blue shirt. She touched her own matching one.

“Do you have a family there?” she asked hesitantly.

“The whole village is like a family to me, Kira,” he replied. “But I have no wife, no child. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I left my family here. Katrina and the child to come.” He smiled. “You.”

She knew she must tell him now.

“Katrina—” she began.

“I know. Your mother is dead. Matt told me.”

Kira nodded, and for the first time in many months she began to cry for her own loss. She had not wept when her mother died. She had willed herself to be strong then, to decide what to do and to do it. Now hot tears stained her face and she covered it with her hands. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed. Her father opened his arms, offering her an embrace, but she turned from him.

“Why didn’t you come back?” she asked finally, choking on the words as she tried to stop crying.

Looking out through the shield she had made with her hands over her eyes, she could see that the question pained him.

“For a very long time,” he said at last, “I remembered nothing. The blows to my head had been intended to kill me, though they failed. But they took my memory. Who I was, why I was there? My wife? My home? I knew nothing of any of it.

“Then, very slowly, as I healed, it began to come back. I remembered small things of the past. Your mother’s voice. A song she sang, *‘Night comes, and colors fade away; sky fades, for blue can never stay . . .’*”

Startled by the familiar lullaby, Kira murmured the words with him. “Yes,” she whispered. “I remember it too.”

“Then very gradually, it all came back to me. But I could not return. I didn’t know how to find the way. I was blind and weakened.

“And if I did find a way back, it would be to meet my death. The ones who wanted me dead were still here.

“Finally,” he explained, “I simply stayed. I mourned my losses. But I stayed and made a life there, without your mother. Without you.

“And then,” he went on, his expression lightening, “after so many years had gone by, the boy appeared. He was exhausted when he arrived, and hungry.”

“He’s always hungry,” Kira said, smiling slightly.

“He said he had come all that way because he had heard that we had blue. He wanted blue for his special friend, who had learned to make all the other colors. When he told me about you, Kira, I knew you must be my daughter. I knew I must let him lead me back.”

He stretched slightly, and yawned. “The boy will find me a safe place to sleep when he returns.”

Kira took his hand, and held it. There were scars even there, she saw.

“Father,” she said, feeling her way uncertainly with the word she had never used before, “they won’t hurt you now.”

“No, I’ll be safely hidden. And after I’m rested, we will slip away, you and I. The boy will help us pack food for the journey. You will be my eyes on the way home. And I will be the strong legs you lean on.”

“No, Father!” Kira said, excited now. “Look!” She waved her arm, indicating the comfortable room. Then she paused, embarrassed. “I’m

sorry. I know you can't really look. But you can *feel* how comfortable it is. There are other rooms like it along the hall, all of them empty except the ones where Thomas and I live. One can be readied for you."

He was shaking his head. "No," he said.

"You don't understand, Father, because you've not been here, but I have a special role in the village. And because of it, I have a special friend on the Council of Guardians. He saved my life! And he looks after me.

"Oh, it's too much to explain, and I know you're tired. But Father, not very long ago, I was in great danger. Someone named Vandara wanted me to be put to the Field. There was a trial. And—"

"Vandara? I remember her. That's the scarred woman?"

"Yes, that's the one," Kira acknowledged.

"It was a terrible thing, her injury. I remember when it happened. She blamed her child. He slipped on wet rocks and grabbed her skirt, so that she fell and gashed her chin and neck on a sharp rock.

"But I thought—"

"He was only a small tyke, but she blamed him. Later, when he died, from the oleander, there were questions. Some people suspected—" He paused, and sighed. "But there was no proof of her guilt.

"She's a cruel woman, though," Kira's father said. "You say she turned on you? And there was a trial?"

"Yes, but I was allowed to stay. I was even given an honored place. I had a defender, a guardian named Jamison. And now he looks after me, Father, and supervises my work. I know he'll find a place for you!"

Happily Kira squeezed her father's hand, thinking of the future they would have together. But it was as if the air in the room shifted. Lines in her father's face tightened. The hand that she held stiffened and withdrew from hers.

"Your defender. Jamison?" Her father touched his own scarred face again. "Yes, he tried to find a place for me before. Jamison is the one who tried to kill me."

Twenty-three

ALONE IN THE dim pre-dawn moonlight of not-yet morning, Kira went down to the dyer's garden that had been so carefully created for her. There, gently patting earth around the moist roots, she planted the woad. "'Gather fresh leaves from first year's growth of woad.'" She repeated the words that Annabella had said. "'And soft rainwater; that makes the blue.'" She carried water from a container in the shed, and soaked the soil around the fragile plants. It would be a long time until the first year's growth. She would not be here to gather those leaves.

When the plants were watered, she sat alone, knees to chin, and rocked herself back and forth as the sun began to rise, a faint pink stain creeping up the eastern rim of the sky. The village was still silent. She tried to put it all together in her mind, to make some sense of it.

But there was no sense, no meaning at all.

Her mother's death: a sudden violent, isolated illness. Such things were rare. Usually illness struck the village and many were taken.

Perhaps her mother had been poisoned?

But why?

Because they wanted Kira.

Why?

So that they could capture her gift: her skill with the threads.

And Thomas? His parents too? And Jo's?

Why?

So that all their gifts would be captive.

Despairing, Kira stared through the early dawn at the garden. The plants glimmered and shifted in the breeze, some of them still in autumn-start bloom. Now, finally, woad had been added to give her the blue she had yearned for. But someone else would harvest the first leaves.

Somewhere nearby, her father slept, gathering strength to return with his newfound daughter to the village where healing people lived in harmony. Together he and Kira would steal away and leave the only world she had ever known. She looked forward to the journey. She would not miss the squalor and noise they would leave behind.

She would long for Matt and his mischief, she thought sadly. And Thomas, so serious and dedicated; she would miss him, too.

And Jo. She smiled at the thought of the little singer who had waved so proudly to the crowd at the Gathering.

Thinking of Jo, Kira remembered something. In the confusion and excitement of her father's arrival, it had disappeared from her mind. Now the awareness and the horror came back, and she gasped.

The muted clanking sound that had puzzled her during the celebration! She could almost hear it again in her mind, a dragging of metal. She had glimpsed its cause at the beginning of the second half of the Song. Then at the conclusion, after the Singer had acknowledged the people's applause, after Jo had scampered happily down from the stage, he moved toward the steps to descend and walk down the aisle. He lifted the robe slightly at the top of the steps, and from her seat at the edge of the stage Kira saw his feet. They were bare and grotesquely misshapen.

His ankles were thickly scarred, more damaged than her father's face. They were caked and scabbed with dried blood. Fresh, bright blood trickled in narrow rivulets across his feet. It all came from the raw, festering skin—infected and dripping—around the metal cuffs with which he was bound. Between the thick ankle cuffs, dragging heavily as he made his way slowly from the stage, was a chain.

He lowered the robe then, and she saw nothing more. Perhaps, she thought, she had imagined it? But watching him as he moved, she heard the sound of the scraping chain against the floor, and she could see behind him a smeared, darkened trail of his blood.

Recalling it now, Kira knew, suddenly and with clarity, what it all meant. It was so simple.

The three of them—the new little Singer who would one day take the chained Singer's place; Thomas the Carver, who with his meticulous tools wrote the history of the world; and she herself, the one who colored that history—they were the artists who could create the future.

Kira could feel it in her fingertips: her ability to twist and weave the colors into the scenes of amazing beauty that she had made all alone, before they assigned her the task of the robe. Thomas had told her that once he too had carved astonishing things into wood that seemed to come alive in his hands. And she could hear the high, haunting melody that the

child had sung in her magical voice, solitary in her room, before they had forced her from it and given her their own song to sing.

The guardians with their stern faces had no creative power. But they had strength and cunning, and they had found a way to steal and harness other people's powers for their own needs. They were forcing the children to describe the future they wanted, not the one that could be.

Kira watched the garden tremble and move as it slept. She saw the newly planted woad settle in, nestled where she had laid it gently beside the yellow bedstraw. "Mostly it dies after flowering once," Annabella had said, describing woad. "But sometimes you find a small shoot lives."

It was those small living shoots she had planted, and something in Kira knew without a doubt that they would survive. She knew something else as well, and with the realization, she rose from the damp grass to go indoors, to find her father and tell him that she could not be his eyes. That she must stay.

Matt was the one who would lead Christopher home.

Late at night they gathered, at the edge of the path that led away from the village, the same path that would wind past Annabella's clearing and continue onward for days to the village of the healing people. Matt was prancing about, eager to begin the journey, proud of his role as the leader. Branch, also eager to set off on an adventure, sniffed and wandered here and there.

"I know you be missing me horrid," Matt confided, "and maybe I be gone a long time, because maybe they be wanting me to visit."

He turned to Christopher. "They gots plenty of food all the time? For visitors? And doggies?"

Christopher, smiling, nodded yes.

Then Matt took Kira aside to whisper an important secret. "I know you can't be getting a hubby because of your horrid gimp," he said in a low, apologetic voice.

"It's all right," she reassured him.

He tugged at her sleeve eagerly. "I been wanting to tell you that them other people—them broken ones? They gets married. And I seen a boy there, a two-syllable boy, not even broken, just about the same age as you.

"I bet you could marry him," Matt announced in a solemn whisper, "iffen you want to."

Kira hugged him. “Thanks, Matt,” she whispered back. “I don’t want to.”

“His eyes be a very amazing blue,” Matt said importantly, as if it might matter.

But Kira smiled and shook her head no.

Thomas carried the bundle of food they had saved and packed; there, at the beginning of the path, he transferred it to Christopher’s strong back. Then the two shook hands.

Kira waited silently.

Her father understood her decision. “You will come when you can,” he said to her. “Matt will go back and forth. He will be our tie. And one day he will bring you.”

“One day our villages will know each other,” Kira assured him. “I can feel that already.” It was true. She could feel the future through her hands, in the pictures her hands were urging her to make. She could feel the broad undecorated expanse waiting, across the shoulders of the robe.

“I have a gift for you,” her father told her.

She looked at him, puzzled. He had come empty-handed and had lived in hiding for the past few days. But now he put something soft into her hands, something that had a quality of comfort.

She could sense but could not see, in the darkness, what it was.

“Threads?” she asked. “A bundle of threads?”

Her father smiled. “I had time, sitting alone, while I waited to return. And my hands are very clever because they have learned to do things unseeing.

“Bit by bit I unraveled the fabric of my blue shirt,” he explained. “The boy found me another to wear.”

“I filched it,” Matt announced with matter-of-fact pride.

“So you will have blue threads,” her father went on, “while you wait for your plants to come to life.”

“Goodbye,” Kira whispered, and hugged her father. She watched through the darkness as the blind man, the renegade boy, and the bent-tailed dog set off down the path. Then, when she could see them no longer, she turned and walked back to what lay waiting. The blue was gathered in her hand, and she could feel it quiver, as if it had been given breath and was beginning to live.

MESSENGER

One

MATTY WAS IMPATIENT to have the supper preparations over and done with. He wanted to cook, eat, and be gone. He wished he were grown so that he could decide when to eat, or whether to bother eating at all. There was something he needed to do, a thing that scared him. Waiting just made it worse.

Matty was no longer a boy, but not yet a man. Sometimes, standing outside the homeplace, he measured himself against the window. Once he had stood only to its sill, his forehead there, pressing into the wood, but now he was so tall he could see inside without effort. Or, moving back in the high grass, he could see himself reflected in the glass pane. His face was becoming manly, he thought, though childishly he still enjoyed making scowls and frowns at his own reflection. His voice was deepening.

He lived with the blind man, the one they called Seer, and helped him. He cleaned the homeplace, though cleaning bored him. The man said it was necessary. So Matty swept the wooden floor each day and straightened the bedcovers: neatly on the man's bed, with haphazard indifference on his own, in the room next to the kitchen. They shared the cooking. The man laughed at Matty's concoctions and tried to teach him, but Matty was impatient and didn't care about the subtlety of herbs.

"We can just put it all together in the pot," Matty insisted. "It all goes together in our bellies anyway."

It was a long-standing and friendly argument. Seer chuckled. "Smell this," he said, and held out the pale green shoot that he'd been chopping.

Matty sniffed dutifully. "Onion," he said, and shrugged. "We can just throw it in.

"Or," he added, "we don't even need to cook it. But then our breath stinks. There's a girl promised she'd kiss me if I have sweet breath. But I think she's teasing."

The blind man smiled in the boy's direction. "Teasing's part of the fun that comes before kissing," he told Matty, whose face had flushed pink with embarrassment.

"You could trade for a kiss," the blind man suggested with a chuckle. "What would you give? Your fishing pole?"

“Don’t. Don’t joke about the trading.”

“You’re right, I shouldn’t. It used to be a light-hearted thing. But now—you’re right, Matty. It’s not to be laughed at anymore.”

“My friend Ramon went to the last Trade Mart, with his parents. But he won’t talk about it.”

“We won’t then, either. Is the butter melted in the pan?”

Matty looked. The butter was bubbling slightly and golden brown. “Yes.”

“Add the onion, then. Stir it so it doesn’t burn.”

Matty obeyed.

“Now smell *that*,” the blind man said. Matty sniffed. The gently sautéing onion released an aroma that made his mouth water.

“Better than raw?” Seer asked.

“But a bother,” Matty replied impatiently. “Cooking’s a bother.”

“Add some sugar. Just a pinch or two. Let it cook for a minute and then we’ll put the rabbit in. Don’t be so impatient, Matty. You always want to rush things, and there’s no need.”

“I want to go out before night comes. I have something to check. I need to eat supper and get out there to the clearing before it’s dark.”

The blind man laughed. He picked up the rabbit parts from the table, and as always, Matty was amazed at how sure his hands were, how he knew just where things had been left. He watched while the man deftly patted flour onto the pieces of meat and then added the rabbit to the pan. The aroma changed when the meat sizzled next to the softened onion. The man added a handful of herbs.

“It doesn’t matter to *you* if it’s dark or light outside,” Matty told him, scowling, “but I need the daylight to look at something.”

“What something is that?” Seer asked, then added, “When the meat has browned, add some broth so it doesn’t stick to the pan.”

Matty obeyed, tilting into the pan the bowl of broth in which the rabbit had been boiled earlier. The dark liquid picked up chunks of onion and chopped herbs, and swirled them around the pieces of meat. He knew to put the lid on now, and to turn the fire low. The stew simmered and he began to set the plates on the table where they would have their supper together.

He hoped the blind man would forget that he had asked *what something.* He didn’t want to tell. Matty was puzzled by what he had hidden in the

clearing. It frightened him, not knowing what it meant. He wondered for a moment whether he could trade it away.

When, finally, the supper dishes were washed and put away, and the blind man sat in the cushioned chair and picked up the stringed instrument that he played in the evening, Matty inched his way to the door, hoping to slip away unnoticed. But the man heard everything that moved. Matty had known him to hear a spider scurry from one side of its web to another.

"Off to Forest again?"

Matty sighed. No escaping. "I'll be back by dark."

"Could be. But light the lamp, in case you're late. After dark it's nice to have window light to aim for. I remember what Forest was like at night."

"Remember from when?"

The man smiled. "From when I could see. Long before you were born."

"Were you scared of Forest?" Matty asked him. So many people were, and with good reason.

"No. It's all an illusion."

Matty frowned. He didn't know what the blind man meant. Was he saying that fear was an illusion? Or that Forest was? He glanced over. The blind man was rubbing the polished wooden side of his instrument with a soft cloth. His thoughts had turned to the smooth wood, though he couldn't see the golden maple with its curly grain. Maybe, Matty thought, *everything* was an illusion to a man who had lost his eyes.

Matty lengthened the wick and checked the lamp to be certain there was oil. Then he struck a match.

"Now you're glad I made you clean the soot from the lamp chimneys, aren't you?" The blind man didn't expect an answer. He moved his fingers on the strings, listening for the tone. Carefully, as he did most evenings, he tuned the instrument. He could hear variations in sounds that seemed to the boy to be all the same. Matty stood in the doorway for a moment, watching. On the table, the lamp flickered. The man sat with his head tilted toward the window so that the summer early-evening light outlined the scars on his face. He listened, then turned a small screw on the back of the instrument's wooden neck, then listened again. Now he was concentrating on the sounds, and had forgotten the boy. Matty slipped away.

Heading for the path that entered Forest at the edge of Village, Matty went by a roundabout way so that he could pass the home of the schoolteacher, a good-hearted man with a deep red stain that covered half of his face. Birthmark, it was called. When Matty was new to Village, he had sometimes found himself staring at the man because he had never known anyone before with such a mark. Where Matty had come from, flaws like that were not allowed. People were put to death for less.

But here in Village, marks and failings were not considered flaws at all. They were valued. The blind man had been given the true name Seer and was respected for the special vision that he had behind his ruined eyes.

The schoolteacher, though his true name was Mentor, was sometimes affectionately called “Rosy” by the children because of the crimson birthmark that spread across his face. Children loved him. He was a wise and patient teacher. Matty, just a boy when he first came here to live with the blind man, had attended school full time for a while, and still went for added learning on winter afternoons. Mentor had been the one who taught him to sit still, to listen, and eventually to read.

He passed by the schoolteacher’s house not to see Mentor, or to admire the lavish flower garden, but in hopes of seeing the schoolteacher’s pretty daughter, who was named Jean and who had recently teased Matty with the promise of a kiss. Often she was in the garden, weeding, in the evenings.

But tonight there was no sign of her, or her father. Matty saw a fat spotted dog sleeping on the porch, but it appeared that no one was at home.

Just as well, he thought. Jean would have delayed him with her giggles and teasing promises—which always came to nothing, and Matty knew that she made them to all the boys—and he should not even have made the side trip in hopes of seeing her.

He took a stick and drew a heart in the dirt on the path beside her garden. Carefully he put her name in the heart, and his own below it. Maybe she would see it and know he had been there, and maybe she would care.

“Hey, Matty! What are you doing?” It was his friend Ramon, coming around the corner. “Have you had supper? Want to come eat with us?”

Quickly Matty moved toward Ramon, hiding the heart traced in the dirt behind him and hoping his friend wouldn’t notice it. It was always fun, in a way, to go to Ramon’s homeplace, because his family had recently traded for something called a Gaming Machine, a large decorated box with a

handle that you pulled to make three wheels spin around inside. Then a bell rang and the wheels stopped at a small window. If their pictures matched, the machine spit out a chunk of candy. It was very exciting to play.

Sometimes he wondered what they had sacrificed for the Gaming Machine, but one never asked.

"We ate already," he said. "I have to go someplace before it gets dark, so we ate early."

"I'd come with you, but I have a cough, and Herbalist said I shouldn't run around too much. I promised to go right home," Ramon said. "But if you wait, I'll run and ask . . ."

"No," Matty replied quickly. "I have to go alone."

"Oh, it's for a message?"

It wasn't, but Matty nodded. It bothered him a little to lie about small things. But he always had; he had grown up lying, and he still found it strange that the people in this place where he now lived thought lying was wrong. To Matty, it was sometimes a way of making things easier, more comfortable, more convenient.

"See you tomorrow, then." Ramon waved and hurried on toward his own homeplace.

Matty knew the paths of Forest as if he had made them. And indeed, some of them *were* of his making, over the years. The roots had flattened as he made his way here and there, seeking the shortest, safest route from place to place. He was swift and quiet in the woods, and he could feel the direction of things without landmarks, in the same way that he could feel weather and was able to predict rain long before the clouds came or there was a shift in wind. Matty simply *knew.*

Others from Village rarely ventured into Forest. It was dangerous for them. Sometimes Forest closed in and entangled people who had tried to travel beyond. There had been terrible deaths, with bodies brought out strangled by vines or branches that had reached out malevolently around the throats and limbs of those who decided to leave Village. Somehow Forest knew. Somehow, too, it knew that Matty's travels were benign and necessary. The vines had never reached out for him. The trees seemed, sometimes, almost to part and usher him through.

"Forest likes me," he had proudly commented once to the blind man.

Seer had agreed. “Maybe it needs you,” he pointed out.

The people needed Matty, too. They trusted him to know the paths, to be safe on them, and to do the errands that required traveling through the thick woods with its complicated, mazelike turnings. He carried messages for them. It was his job. He thought that when it came time to be assigned his true name, *Messenger* would be the choice. He liked the sound of it and looked forward to taking that title.

But this evening Matty was not carrying or collecting a message, though he had fibbed and told Ramon so. He headed to a clearing he knew of, a place that lay just beyond a thick stand of bristly pines. Deftly he jumped a small brook, then turned off the worn path to proceed between two trees, pushing his way through. These trees had grown fast in recent years, and now the clearing was completely concealed and had become Matty’s private place.

He needed privacy for this thing he was discovering about himself: a place to test it in secret, to weigh his own fear for what it meant.

It was dim in the clearing. Behind him, the sun was starting to set over Village, and the light that reached down through Forest was pinkish and pale. Matty made his way across the mossy ground of the clearing to a thicket of tall ferns near the base of a tree. He squatted there and listened, leaning his head toward the ferns. Softly he made a sound, one he had practiced; a brief moment later, he heard the sound he had both hoped and dreaded to hear, in response.

He reached gently into the undergrowth and lifted out a small frog. From his hand, it looked up at him through bulging, unafraid eyes, and made the sound again: *churrump.*

Churrump.

Churrump.

Matty repeated the frog’s throaty sound, as if they were conversing. Though he was nervous, the back-and-forth sounds made him laugh a little. He examined the slick green body carefully. The frog made no effort to leap from his hand. It was passive in his palm, and the deep translucent throat quivered.

He found what he was looking for. In a way, he had hoped he would not. His life would be easier, Matty knew, if the little frog were unmarked and ordinary. But it was not; he had known it would not be; and he knew that things were all shifting for him now. His future had taken a new and secret

turn. It was not the frog's fault, he realized, and gently he replaced the small green creature in the tall ferns and watched the fronds tremble as it moved away, unaware. He realized that he was trembling as well.

Returning to Village along the path that was deep in shadows now, Matty heard sounds from the area beyond the marketplace. At first he thought in surprise that people were singing. Singing was common in Village, but usually not outdoors, not in the evening. Puzzled, he paused and listened. It was not singing at all, Matty realized, but the rhythmic and mournful sound they called keening, the sound of loss. He set aside his other worries and began to hurry through the evening's last light to the homeplace, where the blind man would be waiting and would explain.

Two

"DID YOU HEAR about what happened to Gatherer last night? He tried to go back but it had been too long." Ramon and Matty, carrying their fishing rods, had met for an excursion to catch salmon, and Ramon was bursting with the news.

Matty winced at what his friend said. So Gatherer had been taken by Forest. He was a cheerful man who loved children and small animals, who smiled often and told boisterous jokes.

Ramon spoke in the self-important tone of one who likes being a conveyor of news. Matty was very fond of his friend but sometimes suspected that his true name might eventually turn out to be Boaster.

"How do you know?"

"They found him last night on the path behind the schoolhouse. After I left you, I heard the commotion. I saw them bring his body in."

"I heard the noise. Seer and I thought it must be someone taken."

Matty had arrived at the homeplace the night before to find the blind man preparing for bed and listening attentively to the low collective moan, clearly a large number of people grieving.

"Someone's been lost," the blind man had said with a worried look, pausing while unbuckling his shoes. He sat on his bed, dressed in his nightshirt.

"Should I take a message to Leader?"

"He'll know already, from the sound. It's a keening."

"Should we go?" Matty asked him. In a way, he had wanted to. He had never attended a keening. But in another way, he was relieved to see the blind man shake his head no.

"They have enough. It sounds like a good-sized group; I can hear at least twelve."

As always, Matty was amazed at the capacity of the blind man's perceptions. He himself heard only the chorus of wails. "Twelve?" he asked, and then teased, "Are you sure it's not eleven, or thirteen?"

"I hear at least seven women," the blind man said, not noticing that Matty had intended it as a joke. "Each has a different pitch. And I think

five men, though one is quite young, maybe your age. The voice is not as deep as it will be later. It may be that friend of yours; what's his name?"

"Ramon?"

"Yes. I think I hear Ramon's voice. He's hoarse."

"Yes, he has a cough. He's taking herbs for it."

Now, recalling it, Matty asked his friend, "Did you keen? I think we may have heard you."

"Yes. They had enough. But since I was there, they let me join. I have this cough, though, so my voice wasn't very good. I only went because I wanted to see the body. I've never seen one."

"Of course you have. You were with me when we watched them lay out Stocktender for burial. And you saw that little girl after she fell in the river and they pulled her out drowned. I remember you were there."

"I meant entangled," Ramon explained. "I've seen plenty of dead. But till last night I never saw one entangled."

Neither had Matty. He had only heard of it. Entangling happened so rarely that he had begun to think of it as a myth, something from the past. "What was it like? They say it's hideous."

Ramon nodded. "It was. It looked as if first the vines grabbed him by the neck and pulled tight. Poor Gatherer. He had grabbed at them to pull loose but then they curled around his hands as well. He was completely entangled. The look on his face was fearsome. His eyes were open but twigs and all had started to enter under the lids. And they were in his mouth, too. I could see something wrapped around his tongue."

Matty shuddered. "He was such a nice man," he said. "He always tossed berries to us when he was out gathering. I would open my mouth wide and he would aim for it. If I caught a berry in my mouth he cheered and gave me extra."

"Me too." Ramon looked sad. "And his wife has a new baby. Someone said that's why he went. He wanted to go tell her family about the baby."

"But didn't he know what would happen? Hadn't he received Warnings?"

Ramon coughed suddenly. He bent over and gasped. Then he straightened up and shrugged. "His wife says not. He went once before, when their first child was born, and had no trouble. No Warning."

Matty thought about it. Gatherer must have overlooked a Warning. The early ones were sometimes small. He felt great sadness for the gentle,

happy man who had been so brutally entangled and had left two children fatherless. Forest always gave Warnings, Matty knew. He entered so often himself and always was watchful. If he had one Warning, even the smallest, he would never enter again. The blind man had entered only once, to return to his original village when it needed his wisdom. He had come back safely, but he had had a small Warning on his return: a sudden painful puncture from what had seemed a tiny twig. He couldn't see it, of course, though later he said he had felt it come forward, had perceived it with the kind of knowledge that had made the people designate Seer as his true name. But Matty, still a young boy, had been with him then, as a guide; and Matty had seen the twig grow, expand, sharpen, aim itself, and stab. There was no question. It was a Warning. The blind man could never enter Forest again. His time for going back had ended.

Yet Matty had never been warned. Again and again he entered Forest, moved along its trails, spoke to its creatures. He understood that for some reason, he was special to Forest. He had traveled its paths for years, six years now, since that first time, when he was still very young and had left the home that had been cruel to him.

"I'm never going in," Ramon said firmly. "Not after seeing what it did to Gatherer."

"You don't have a place to go back to," Matty pointed out. "You were born in Village. It's only those who try to go back to someplace that they left once."

"Like you, maybe."

"Like me, except I'm careful."

"I'm not taking the chance. Is this a good place to fish?" Ramon asked, changing the subject. "I don't want to walk any farther. I'm tired all the time lately." They had been ambling toward the river, skirting the cornfield, and had reached the grassy bank where they often fished together. "We caught a lot here last time. My mother cooked some for dinner, but there were so many that I nibbled on left-overs while I was playing the Gaming Machine after dinner."

The Gaming Machine again. Ramon mentioned it so often. Maybe *Gloater* would be his true name, Matty thought. He had already decided on Boaster, but now, in his mind, he decided Gloater was more appropriate. Or Bragger. He was tired of hearing about the Gaming Machine. And a little jealous, too.

“Yes, here,” Matty said. He scrambled down the slippery bank to the place where a boulder, large enough to stand on, jutted out. Both boys climbed the huge outcropping of rock and settled at the top to prepare their fishing gear and cast their lines for salmon.

Behind them, Village, quiet and peaceful, continued its daily life. Gatherer had been buried this morning. With her toddler playing on the floor by her feet, his widow now nursed her new baby on the porch of her homeplace, attended by comforting women who sat with their knitting and embroidery and spoke only of happy things.

In the schoolhouse, Mentor, the schoolteacher, gently tutored a mischievous eight-year-old named Gabe, who had neglected his studies to play and now needed help. His daughter, Jean, sold flower bouquets and loaves of fresh-baked bread in her marketplace stall while she flirted, laughing, with the gangly, self-conscious boys who stopped by.

The blind man, Seer, made his way through the lanes of Village, checking on the populace, assessing the well-being of each individual. He knew each fence post, each crossroad, each voice and smell and shadow. If anything was amiss, he would do his best to make it right.

From a window, the tall young man known as Leader looked down and watched the slow and cheerful pace of Village, of the people he loved, who had chosen him to rule and guard them. He had come here as a boy, finding his way with great difficulty. The Museum held the remains of a broken sled in a glass case, and the inscription explained that it had been Leader’s arrival vehicle. There were many relics of arrival in the Museum, because each person who had not been born in Village had his own story of coming there. The blind man’s history was told there, too: how he had been carried, near dead, from the place where enemies had left him with his eyes torn out and his future in his own place gone.

In the Museum’s glass cases there were shoes and canes and bicycles and a wheeled chair. But somehow the small red-painted sled had become a symbol of courage and hope. Leader was young but he represented those things. He had never tried to go back, never wanted to. This was his home now, these his people. As he did every afternoon, he stood at the window and watched. His eyes were a pale, piercing blue.

He watched with gratitude as the blind man moved through the lanes.

He could see beyond a porch railing to the young woman who rocked an infant and mourned her husband. *Grieve gently,* he thought.

He could see beyond the cornfield to where two young boys named Matty and Ramon were dangling lines into the river. *Good fishing,* he thought.

He could see beyond the marketplace to the cemetery where Gatherer's ruined body had been buried. *Rest in peace,* he thought.

Finally he looked toward the border of Village, to the place where the path entered Forest and became shrouded in shadows. Leader could see beyond the shadows but was not certain what he saw. It was blurred, but there was something in Forest that disturbed Leader's consciousness and made him uneasy. He could not tell whether it was good or bad. Not yet.

Deep in the thick undergrowth near the clearing, at the edge of Leader's puzzled awareness, a small green frog ate an insect it had caught with its sticky, fast-darting tongue. Squatting, it moved its protruding eyes around, trying to sense more insects to devour. Finding nothing, it hopped away. One back leg was oddly stiff but the frog barely noticed.

Three

"IF WE HAD a Gaming Machine," Matty commented in a studied, offhand manner, "our evenings would never be boring."

"You think our evenings are boring, Matty? I thought you enjoyed our reading together."

Seer laughed, and corrected himself. "Sorry. I meant your reading to me, Matty, and my listening. It's my favorite time of day."

Matty shrugged. "No, I like reading to you, Seer. But I meant it's not *exciting.*"

"Well, we should choose a different book, perhaps. That last one—I've forgotten its name, Matty—was a little slow-going. *Moby Dick.* That was the one."

"It was okay," Matty conceded. "But it was too long."

"Well, ask at the library for something that would move along more quickly."

"Did I explain to you how a Gaming Machine works, Seer? It moves very quickly."

The blind man chuckled. He had heard it all before, many times. "Run out to the garden and get a head of lettuce, Matty, while I finish cleaning the fish. Then you can make a salad while the fish cooks."

"And *also,*" Matty continued in a loud voice as he headed for the garden just beyond the door, "it would be a nice end to a meal. Something sweet. Sort of a dessert. I did tell you, didn't I, how the Gaming Machine gives you a candy when you win?"

"See if there's a nice ripe tomato while you're out there getting the lettuce. A *sweet* one," Seer suggested in an amused voice.

"You might get a peppermint," Matty went on, "or a gumdrop, or maybe something they call a sourball." Beside the back step he reached into the vegetable garden and uprooted a small head of lettuce. As an afterthought, he pinched a cucumber loose from its vine nearby, and pulled some leaves from a clump of basil. Back in the kitchen, he put the salad things in the sink and halfheartedly began to wash them.

"Sourballs come in different colors, and each color is a flavor," he announced, "but I suppose that wouldn't interest you."

Matty sighed. He looked around. Even though he knew the blind man wouldn't see his gesture, he pointed to the nearby wall, which was decorated by a colorful wall-hanging, a gift from the blind man's talented daughter. Matty stood often before it, looking carefully at the intricate embroidered tapestry depicting a large thick forest separating two small villages far from each other. It was the geography of his own life, and that of the blind man, for they had both moved from that place to this other, with great difficulty.

"The Gaming Machine could stand right there," he decided. "It would be very convenient. *Extremely* convenient," he added, aware that the blind man liked it when he exercised his vocabulary.

Seer went to the sink, moved the washed lettuce to the side, and began to rinse the cleaned salmon steaks. "And so we would give up—or maybe even trade away—reading, and music, in exchange for the *extreme* excitement of pulling a handle and watching sourballs spit forth from a mechanical device?" he asked.

Put that way, Matty thought, the Gaming Machine didn't actually seem such a good trade. "Well," he said, "it's fun."

"Fun," the blind man repeated. "Is the stove ready? And the pan?"

Matty looked at the stove. "In a minute," he said. He stirred the burning wood a bit so that the fire flared. Then he placed the oiled pan on top. "I'll do the fish," he said, "if you fix the salad.

"I brought some basil in, too," he added, with a grin, "just because you're such a salad perfectionist. It's right there beside the lettuce." He watched while the blind man's deft hands found the basil and tore the leaves into the wooden bowl.

Then Matty took the fish and laid it in the pan, swirling the oil around. In a moment the aroma of the sautéing salmon filled the room.

Outside, it was twilight. Matty adjusted the wick on an oil lamp and lighted it. "You know," he remarked, "when you win a candy, a bell rings and colored lights blink. Of course that wouldn't matter to *you,*" he added, "but some of us would really appreciate—"

"Matty, Matty, Matty," the blind man said. "Keep an eye on that fish. It cooks quickly. No bell rings when it's done.

"And don't forget," he added, "that they traded for that Gaming Machine. It probably came at a high cost."

Matty frowned. "Sometimes you get licorice," he said as a last attempt.

“Do you know what they traded? Has Ramon told you?”

“No. Nobody ever tells.”

“Maybe he doesn’t even know. Maybe his parents didn’t tell him. That’s probably good.”

Matty took the pan from the stove and slid the browned fish onto two plates, one after the other. He placed them on the table and brought the salad bowl from the sink. “It’s ready,” he said.

The blind man went to the bread container and found two thick pieces of bread that smelled fresh-baked. “I got this at the marketplace this morning,” he said, “from Mentor’s daughter. She’ll make someone a good wife. Is she as pretty as her voice makes her sound?”

But Matty was not going to be diverted by reminders of the schoolteacher’s pretty daughter. “When’s the next Trade Mart?” he asked, when they were both seated.

“You’re too young.”

“I heard that there was one coming soon.”

“Pay no attention to what you hear. You’re too young.”

“I won’t be always. I ought to watch.”

The blind man shook his head. “It would be painful,” he said. “Eat your fish now, Matty, while it’s warm.”

Matty poked at the salmon with his fork. He could tell that there was to be no more discussion of trading. The blind man had never traded, not one single time, and was proud of it. But Matty thought that someday he himself would. Maybe not for a Gaming Machine. But there were other things that Matty wanted. He ought to be allowed to know how the trading worked.

He decided he would find out. But first he had the other thing to worry about, and the troubling awareness that he had not dared to tell the blind man of it.

There were no secrets in Village. It was one of the rules that Leader had proposed, and all of the people had voted in favor of it. Everyone who had come to Village from elsewhere, all of those who had not been born here, had come from places with secrets. Sometimes—not very often, for inevitably it caused sadness—people described their places of origin: places with cruel governments, harsh punishments, desperate poverty, or false comforts.

There were so many such places. Sometimes, hearing the stories, remembering his own childhood, Matty was astounded. At first, having found his way to Village, he had thought his own brutal beginnings—a fatherless hovel for a home; a grim, defeated mother who beat him and his brother bloody—were unusual. But now he knew that there were communities everywhere, sprinkled across the vast landscape of the known world, in which people suffered. Not always from beatings and hunger, the way he had. But from ignorance. From *not knowing.* From being kept from knowledge.

He believed in Leader, and in Leader's insistence that all of Village's citizens, even the children, read, learn, participate, and care for one another. So Matty studied and did his best.

But sometimes he slipped back into the habits of his earlier life, when he had been a sly and deceitful boy in order to survive.

"I can't help it," he had argued glumly to the blind man, in the beginning of their life together, when he had been caught in some small transgression. "It's what I learnt."

"*Learned.*" The correction was gentle.

"Learned," Matty had repeated.

"Now you are relearning. You are learning honesty. I'm sorry to punish you, Matty, but Village is a population of honest and decent people, and I want you to be one of us."

Matty had hung his head. "So you'll beat me?"

"No, your punishment will be no lessons today. You will help me in the garden instead of going to school."

It had seemed, to Matty then, a laughable punishment. Who wanted to go to school, anyway? Not him!

Yet, when he was deprived of it, and could hear the other children reciting and singing in the schoolhouse, he felt woefully lost. Gradually he had learned to change his behavior and to become one of Village's happy children, and soon a good student. Now half grown and soon to finish school, he slipped only occasionally into old bad habits and almost always caught himself when he did.

It bothered Matty greatly, now, having a secret.

Four

LEADER HAD SUMMONED Matty for message-running.

Matty enjoyed going to Leader's homeplace, because of the stairs—others had stairs, though Matty and the blind man did not, but Leader's stairs were circular, which fascinated Matty, and he liked going up and down—and because of the books. Others had books, too. Matty had a few schoolbooks, and he often borrowed other books from the library so that he could read stories to the blind man in the evenings, a time they both enjoyed.

But Leader's homeplace, where he lived alone, had more books than Matty had ever seen in one place. The entire ground floor, except for the kitchen to one side, was lined with shelves, and the shelves were filled with volumes of every sort. Leader allowed Matty to lift down and look at any one he wanted. There were stories, of course, not unlike the ones he found in the library. There were history books as well, like those he studied at school, the best ones filled with maps that showed how the world had changed over centuries. Some books had shiny pages that showed paintings of landscapes unlike anything Matty had ever seen, or of people costumed in odd ways, or of battles, and there were many quiet painted scenes of a woman holding a newborn child. Still others were written in languages from the past and from other places.

Leader laughed wryly when Matty had opened to a page and pointed to the unknown language. "It's called Greek," Leader said. "I can read a few words. But in the place of my childhood, we were not allowed to learn such things. So in my spare time, I have Mentor come and help me with languages. But . . ." Leader sighed. "I have so little spare time. Maybe when I'm old, I will sit here and study. I'd like that, I think."

Matty had replaced the book and run his hand gently over the leather bindings of the ones beside it.

"If you weren't allowed to learn," he asked, "why did they let you bring the books?"

Leader laughed. "You've seen the little sled," he said.

"In the Museum?"

“Yes. My vehicle of arrival. They’ve made such a thing of it, it’s almost embarrassing. But it is true that I came on that sled. A desperate boy, half dead. No books! The books were brought to me later. I have never been as surprised in my life as I was the day those books arrived.”

Matty had looked around at the thousands of books. In his own arms—and Matty was strong—he could have carried no more than ten or twelve at a time.

“How did they come to you?”

“A river barge. Suddenly there it was. Huge wooden crates aboard, and each one filled with books. Until that time I had always been afraid. A year had passed. Then two. But I was still afraid; I thought they would still be looking for me, that I would be recaptured, put to death, because no one had ever fled my community successfully before.

“It was only when I saw the books that I knew that things had changed, that I was free, and that back there, where I had come from, they were rebuilding themselves into something better.

“The books were a kind of forgiveness, I think.”

“So you could have gone back,” Matty said. “Was it too late? Had Forest given you Warnings?”

“No. But why would I go back? I had found a home here, the way everyone has. That’s why we have the Museum, Matty, to remind us of how we came, and why: to start fresh, and begin a new place from what we had learned and carried from the old.”

Today Matty admired the books, as he always did in Leader’s homeplace, but he didn’t linger to touch or examine them. Nor did he stop to admire the staircase, with its intricate risers of crafted, polished wood that ascended in a circle to the next level. When Leader called, “Up here, Matty,” he bounded up the stairs to the second floor, into the spacious room where Leader lived and worked.

Leader was at his desk. He looked up from the papers in front of him and smiled at Matty. “How’s the fishing?”

Matty shrugged and grinned. “Not too bad. Caught four yesterday.”

Leader laid his pen aside and leaned back in his chair. “Tell me something, Matty. You and your friend are out there a lot, fishing. And you’ve been doing it for a long time—since you came to Village as a little boy. Isn’t that so?”

“I don’t remember exactly how long. I was only about this high when I came.” Matty gestured with his hand, placing it level with the second button of his own shirt.

“Six years,” Leader told him. “You arrived six years ago. So you’ve been fishing for all that time.”

Matty nodded. But he stiffened. He was wary. It was too soon for his true name to be bestowed, he thought. Surely it was not going to be *Fisherman!* Was that why Leader had called him here?

Leader looked at him and began to laugh. “Relax, Matty! When you look like that, I can almost read your mind! Don’t worry. It was only a question.”

“A question about fishing. Fishing’s a thing I do just to get food or to fool around. I don’t want it to turn into something more.” Matty liked that about Leader, that you could say what you wanted to him, that you could tell him what you felt.

“I understand. You needn’t worry about that. I was asking because I need to assess the food supply. Some are saying there are fewer fish than there once were. Look here, what I’ve been writing.” He passed a paper over to Matty. There were columns of numbers, lists headed “Salmon” and “Trout.”

Matty read the numbers and frowned. “It might be true,” he said. “I remember at first I would pull fish after fish from the river. But you know what, Leader?”

“What?” Leader took the paper back from Matty and laid it with others on his desk.

“I was little then. And maybe you don’t remember this, because you’re older than I am . . .”

Leader smiled. “I’m still a young man, Matty. I remember being a boy.” Matty thought he noticed a brief flicker of sadness in Leader’s eyes, despite the warm smile. So many people in Village—including Matty—had sad memories of their childhoods.

“What I meant was, I remember all the fish, the feeling that they would never end. I felt that I could drop my line in again and again and again and there would always be fish. Now there aren’t. But, Leader . . .”

Leader looked at him and waited.

“Things seem *more* when you’re little. They seem bigger, and distances seem farther. The first time I came here through Forest? The journey

seemed forever."

"It does take days, Matty, from where you started."

"Yes, I know. It still takes days. But now it doesn't seem as far or as long. Because I'm older, and bigger, and I've gone back and forth again and again, and I know the way, and I'm not scared. So it seems shorter."

Leader chuckled. "And the fish?"

"Well," Matty acknowledged, "there don't seem to be as many. But maybe it's just that I was a little boy back then, when the fish seemed endless."

Leader tapped the tip of his pen on the desk as he thought. "Maybe so," he said after a moment. He stood. From a table in the corner of the room he took a stack of folded papers.

"Messages?" Matty asked.

"Messages. I'm calling a meeting."

"About *fish?*"

"No. I wish it were just about fish. Fish would be easy."

Matty took the stack of message papers he would be delivering. Before he turned to the staircase to leave, he felt compelled to say, "Fish aren't ever easy. You have to use just the right bait, and know the right place to go, and then you have to pull the line up at just the right moment, because if you don't, the fish can wiggle right off your hook, and not everybody is good at it, and . . ."

He could hear Leader laughing, still, when he left.

It took Matty most of the day to deliver all of the messages. It wasn't a hard task. He liked the harder ones better, actually, when he was outfitted with food and a carrying pack and sent on long journeys through Forest. Although he hadn't been sent to it in almost two years, Matty especially liked trips that took him back to his former home, where he could greet his boyhood pals with a somewhat superior smile, and snub those who had been cruel to him in the past. His mother was dead, he had been told. His brother was still there, and looked at Matty with more respect than he ever had in the past, but they were strangers to each other now. The community where he had lived was greatly changed and seemed foreign, though less harsh than he remembered.

Today he simply made his way around Village, delivering notice of the meeting that would be held the following week. Reading the message

himself, he could understand Leader's questioning about the supply of fish, and the concern and worry that Matty had felt from him.

There had been a petition—signed by a substantial number of people—to close Village to outsiders. There would have to be a debate, and a vote.

It had happened before, such a petition.

"We voted it down just a year ago," the blind man reminded Matty when the message had been read to him. "There must be a stronger movement now."

"There are still plenty of fish," Matty pointed out, "and the fields are full of crops."

The blind man crumpled the message and dropped it into the fire. "It's not the fish or crops," he said. "They'll use that, of course. They argued dwindling food supply last time. It's . . ."

"Not enough housing?"

"More than that. I can't think of the word for it. *Selfishness,* I guess. It's creeping in."

Matty was startled. Village had been created out of the opposite: selflessness. He knew that from his studies and from hearing the history. Everyone did.

"But in the message—I could have read it to you again if you hadn't burned it—it says that the group who wants to close the border is headed by Mentor! The schoolteacher!"

The blind man sighed. "Give the soup a stir, would you, Matty?"

Obediently Matty moved the wooden ladle around in the pot and watched beans and chopped tomatoes churn in the thick mixture as it simmered. Thinking still of his teacher, he added, "He's not selfish!"

"I know he isn't. That's why it's puzzling."

"He welcomes everyone to the school, even new ones who have no learning, who can't even speak properly."

"Like you, when you came," the blind man said with a smile. "It couldn't have been easy, but he taught you."

"He had to tame me first," Matty acknowledged, grinning. "I was wild, wasn't I?"

Seer nodded. "Wild. But Mentor loves teaching those who need it."

"Why would he want to close the border?"

"Matty?"

"What?"

“Has Mentor traded, do you know?”

Matty thought about it. “It’s school vacation now, so I don’t see him as often. But I stop by his homeplace now and then . . .” He didn’t mention Jean, the widowed schoolteacher’s daughter. “I haven’t noticed anything different in his household.

“No Gaming Machine,” he added, laughing a little.

But the blind man didn’t chuckle in reply. He sat thinking for a moment. Then he said, in a worried voice, “It’s much more than just a Gaming Machine.”

Five

THE SCHOOLTEACHER'S DAUGHTER told me that her dog has three puppies. I can have one when it's big enough, if I like."

"Isn't she the one who promised you a kiss? Now a dog as well? I'd settle for the kiss if I were you, Matty." The blind man smiled, loosened a beet from the earth, and placed it in the basket of vegetables. They were in the garden together.

"I miss my dog. He wasn't any trouble." Matty glanced over to the corner of their homeplace's plot of land, beyond the garden, to the small grave where they had buried Branch two years before.

"You're right, Matty. Your little dog was a good companion for many years. It would be fun to have a puppy around." The blind man's voice was gentle.

"I could train a dog to lead you."

"I don't need leading. Could you train a dog to cook?"

"Anything but beets," Matty said, making a face as he threw another into the basket.

But when he went in the afternoon to the schoolteacher's homeplace, Matty found Jean distraught. "Two died last night," she said. "They took sick. Now there's only one puppy left, and it's sick, and the mother as well."

"How have you tended them?"

Jean shook her head in despair. "Same as I would for my father or myself. Infusion of white willow bark. But the puppy's too little to drink, and the mother's too sick. She lapped a bit and then just put her head down."

"Will you take me to see them?"

Jean led him into the small house, and though he was concerned for the dogs, Matty found himself looking around as they walked through, remembering what the blind man had asked. He noticed the sturdy furniture, neatly arranged, and the bookcases filled with Mentor's books. In the kitchen, Jean's baking pans, and the bowls in which she mixed dough, were set out, ready for her wonderful breads to be made.

He saw nothing that hinted of a trade. Nothing silly like a Gaming Machine, nothing frivolous like the soft upholstered furniture decorated with fringe that a foolish young couple down the road had traded for.

Of course there were other kinds of trades, Matty knew, though he didn't fully understand. He had heard murmurs about them. There were trades for things you didn't see. Those were the most dangerous trades.

"They're in here." Jean opened the door to the storage shed attached to the house at the back of the kitchen. Matty entered and knelt beside the mother dog where she lay on a folded blanket. The tiny puppy, motionless but for its labored breathing, lay in the curve of her belly, the way any puppy would. But a healthy pup would have been wiggling and sucking. This one should have been pawing at its mother for milk.

Matty knew dogs. He loved them. Gently he touched the puppy with his finger. Then, startled, he jerked his hand away. He had felt something painful.

Oddly, it made him think of lightning.

He remembered how he had been instructed, even as a small boy back in his old place, to go indoors during a thunderstorm. He had seen a tree split and blackened by a lightning strike, and he knew that it could happen to a human: the flash and the burning power that would surge through you, looking for a place to enter the earth.

He had watched through the window and seen great fiery bolts split the sky, and he had smelled the sulfurous smell that they sometimes left behind.

There was a man in Village, a farmer, who had stood in the field beside his plow, waiting as dark clouds gathered overhead, hoping the storm would pass by. The lightning had found him there, and though the farmer had survived, he had lost all his memory but for the sensation of raw power that had entered him that afternoon. People tended him now, and he helped with farm chores, but his energy was gone, taken away by the mysterious energy that lived in lightning.

Matty had felt this sensation—the one of pulsating power, as if he had the power of lightning within his own self—in the clearing, on a sunny day with no storm brewing.

He had tried to put it out of his mind afterward, any thoughts of the day it had happened, because it frightened him so and made him have a secret,

which he did not want. But Matty knew, pulling his hand from the ailing puppy, that it was time to test it once again.

"Where's your father?" he asked Jean. He wanted no one to watch.

"He had a meeting to go to. You know about the petition?"

Matty nodded. Good. The schoolteacher was not around.

"I don't think he really even cares about the meeting. He just wants to see Stocktender's widow. He's courting her." Jean spoke with affectionate amusement. "Can you imagine? Courting, at his age?"

He needed the girl to be gone. Matty thought. "I want you to go to Herbalist's. Get yarrow."

"I have yarrow in my own garden! Right beside the door!" Jean replied.

He didn't need yarrow, not really. He needed her *gone*. Matty thought quickly. "Spearmint? Lemon balm? Catnip? Do you have all of those?"

She shook her head. "No catnip. If cats were attracted to my garden, the dog would make a terrible fuss.

"Wouldn't you, poor thing?" she said sweetly, leaning down to murmur to the dying mother dog. She stroked the dog's back but it did not lift its head. Its eyes were beginning to glaze.

"Go," Matty told her in an urgent voice. "Get those things."

"Do you think they'll help?" Jean asked dubiously. She took her hand from the dog and stood, but she lingered.

"Just go!" Matty ordered.

"You needn't use a rude tone, Matty," Jean said with an edge in her voice. But she turned with a flounce of her skirt and went. He barely heard the sound of the door closing behind her. Steeling himself against the painful vibrating shock that he knew would go through his entire body, Matty placed his left hand on the mother dog, his right on the puppy, and willed them to live.

An hour later, Matty stumbled home, exhausted. Back at Mentor's house, Jean was feeding the mother dog and giggling at the antics of the lively puppy.

"Who would have thought of that combination of herbs? Isn't it amazing!" she had said in delight, watching the creatures revive.

"Lucky guess." He let Jean believe it was the herbs. She was distracted by the sudden liveliness of the dogs and didn't even notice how weak

Matty was. He sat leaning against the wall in the shed and watched her tend them. But his vision was slightly blurred and his whole body ached.

Finally, when he had regained a little strength, he forced himself to stand and leave. Fortunately his own homeplace was empty. The blind man was out somewhere, and Matty was glad of that. Seer would have noticed something wrong. He could always feel it. He said the atmosphere in the homeplace changed, as if wind had shifted, if Matty had so much as a cold.

And this was much more. He staggered into his room off the kitchen and lay down on his bed, breathing hard. Matty had never felt so weak, so drained. Except for the frog . . .

The frog was smaller, he thought. But it was the same thing.

He had come across the little frog by chance, in the clearing. He had no reason to be there that day; he had simply wanted to be alone, away from busy Village, and had gone into Forest to get away, as he did sometimes.

Barefoot, he had stepped on the frog, and was startled. “Sorry!” he had said playfully, and reached down to pick the little fellow up. “Are you all right? You should have hopped away when you heard me coming.”

But the frog wasn’t all right, and couldn’t have escaped with a hop. It hadn’t been Matty’s light step that had injured it; he could see that right away. Some creature—Matty thought probably a fox or weasel—had inflicted a terrible wound upon the small green thing, and the frog was almost dead of it. One leg dangled, torn away from the body, held there only by an oozing bit of ragged tissue. In his hand, the frog drew a shuddering breath and then was still.

“Someone chewed you up and spit you out,” Matty said. He was sympathetic but matter-of-fact. The hard life and quick death of Forest’s creatures were everyday things. “Well,” he said, “I’ll give you a nice burial.”

He knelt to dig out a spot with his hands in the mossy earth. But when he tried to set the little body down, he found that he was connected to it in a way that made no sense. A painful kind of power surged from his hand, flowing into the frog, and held them bound together.

Confused and alarmed, he tried to scrape the sticky body of the frog off his hand. But he couldn’t. The vibrating pain held them connected. Then, after a moment, while Matty knelt, still mystified by what was happening, the frog’s body twitched.

“So you’re not dead. Get off of me, then.” Now he was able to drop the frog to the ground. The stab of pain eased.

“What was that all about?” Matty found himself talking to the frog as if it might be able to reply. “I thought you were dead, but you weren’t. You’re going to lose your leg, though. And your hopping days are over. I’m sorry for that.”

He stood and looked down at the impassive frog. *Churrump.* Its throat made the sound.

“Yes. I agree. Same to you.” Matty turned to leave.

Churrump.

The sound compelled him to go back and to kneel again. The frog’s wide-open eyes, which had been glazed with death only a few moments before, were now clear and alert. It stared at Matty.

“Look, I’m going to put you over here in the ferns, because if you stay in the open, some other creature will come along and gobble you up. You have a big disadvantage now, not being able to hop away. You’ll have to learn to hide.”

He picked up the frog and carried it to the thicket of high ferns. “If I had my knife with me,” he told it, “I’d probably just slice through those threads that are holding your leg. Then maybe you could heal more quickly. As it is, you’ll be dragging that leg around and it will burden you. But there’s nothing I can do.”

He leaned down to turn it loose, still thinking about how best to help it. “Maybe I can find a sharp rock and slice through. It’s just a tiny bit of flesh and it probably wouldn’t even pain you if I did it.

“You stay right here,” Matty commanded, and placed the frog on the earth beside the ferns. *As if it could hop*, he thought.

Back at the edge of the small stream he had crossed, Matty found what he needed as a tool: a bit of rock with a sharp edge. He took it back to where the wounded frog lay, immobilized by its wound.

“Now,” Matty told the frog, “don’t be scared. I’m going to spread you out a bit and then carefully cut that dead leg away. It’s the best thing for you.” He turned the frog onto its back and touched the shredded leg, meaning to arrange it in a way that would make the amputation simple and fast. There were only a few sticky strands of flesh to slice through.

But he felt a sudden jolt of painful energy enter his arm, concentrated in his fingertips. Matty was unable to move. His hand grasped the nearly

severed leg and he could feel his own blood moving through its vessels. His pulse thrummed and he could hear the sound of it.

Terrified, Matty held his breath for what seemed forever. Then it all stopped. The thing that had happened ended. He lifted his hand tentatively from the wounded frog.

Churrump.

Churrump.

"I'm leaving now. I don't know what happened, but I'm leaving now." He dropped the sharp rock and tried to rise, but his knees were weak and he felt dizzy and sick. Still kneeling beside the frog, Matty took a few long breaths, trying to get his strength again so that he could flee.

Churrump.

"Stop it. I don't want to hear that."

As if it understood what Matty had said, the frog turned, flopping itself over from its belly-up position, and moved toward the ferns. But it was not dragging a useless leg. Both legs were moving—awkwardly, to be sure, but the frog was propelling itself with both legs. It disappeared into the clump of quivering ferns.

After a moment Matty was able to stand. Desperately tired, he had made his way out of Forest and stumbled home.

Now, lying on his bed, he felt the same exhaustion, magnified. His arms ached. Matty thought about what had happened. *The frog was very small. This was two dogs.*

This was bigger.

I must learn to control it, Matty told himself.

Then, surprisingly, he began to cry. Matty had a boyish pride in the fact that he never cried. But now he wept, and it felt as if the tears were cleansing him, as if his body needed to empty itself. Tears ran down his cheeks.

Finally, shuddering with exhaustion, he wiped his eyes, turned on his side, and slept, though it was still midday. The sun was high in the sky over Village. Matty dreamed of vague, frightening things connected to pain, and his body was tense even as he slept. Then his dream changed. His muscles relaxed and he became serene in his sleep. He was dreaming now of healed wounds, new life, and calm.

Six

"NEW ONES COMING! And there's a pretty girl among them!"

Ramon called to Matty but didn't stop. He was hurrying past, eager to get to Village's entrance place, where new ones always came in. There was, in fact, a Welcome sign there, though many new ones, they had discovered, could not read. Matty had been one of those. The word welcome had meant nothing to him then.

"I saw it but couldn't read it," he had said to Seer once, "and you could have read it but you couldn't see it."

"We're quite a pair, aren't we? No wonder we get along so well together." The blind man had laughed.

"May I go? I'm almost done here." When Ramon ran past and called to them, Matty and the blind man had been clearing out the garden, pulling up the last of the overgrown pea vines. Their season was long past. Soon summer would end. They would be storing the root vegetables soon.

"Yes, of course. I'll go, too. It's important to welcome them."

They wiped their dirty hands quickly and left the garden, closing the gate behind them and following the same path Ramon had rushed along. The entrance was not far, and the new ones were gathered there. In the past, new ones had mostly arrived alone or in pairs, but now they seemed to come in groups: whole families, often, looking tired, for they had come great distances, and frightened, because they had left fearsome things behind and usually their escape had been dangerous and terrifying. But always they were hopeful, too, and clearly relieved to be greeted by the smiles. The people of Village prided themselves on the welcome, many of them leaving their regular work to go and be part of it.

Frequently the new ones were damaged. They hobbled on canes or were ill. Sometimes they were disfigured by wounds or simply because they had been born that way. Some were orphans. All of them were welcomed.

Matty joined the crowded semicircle and smiled encouragingly at the new ones as the greeters took their names, one by one, and assigned them to helpers who would lead them to their living spaces and help them settle in. He thought he saw the girl Ramon had mentioned, a thin but lovely girl about their age. Her face was dirty and her hair uncombed. She held the

hand of a younger child whose eyes were thick with yellow mucus; it was a common ailment of new ones, quickly healed with herbal mixtures. He could tell that the girl was worried for the child, and he tried to smile at her in a way that was reassuring.

There were more than usual this time. “It’s a big group,” Matty whispered to the blind man.

“Yes, I can hear that it is. I wonder if somehow they have begun to hear rumors that we may close.”

As he spoke, they both heard something and turned. Approaching the welcoming entrance and the busy processing of the new ones, a small group of people Matty recognized—with Mentor leading them—came forward, chanting, “Close. Close. No more. No more.”

The welcoming group was uncertain how to react. They continued to smile at the new ones and to reach forward to take their hands. But the chant made everyone uncomfortable.

Finally, in the confusion, Leader appeared. Someone had sent for him, apparently. The crowd parted to allow him through and the chanters fell silent.

Leader’s voice was, as always, calm. He spoke first to the new ones, welcoming them. He would have done this later in the day, after they had been fed and settled. But now, instead of waiting, he reassured them briefly.

“We were all of us new ones once,” he said with a smile, “except for the youngsters who have been born here.

“We know what you have been through.

“You will no longer be hungry. You will no longer live under unfair rule. You will never be persecuted again.

“We are honored to have you among us. Welcome to your new home. Welcome to Village.”

He turned to the greeters and said, “Do the processing later. They are tired. Take them to their living spaces so they can have baths and food. Let them rest for a while.”

The greeters encircled the new ones and led them away.

Then Leader turned to those who remained. “Thank you, those of you who came to give welcome. It is one of the most important things we do in Village.

“Those of you who object? Mentor? You and the others?” He looked at the small group of dissenters. “You have that right, as you know. The right to dissent is one of our most important freedoms here.

“But the meeting is in four days. Let me suggest that instead of worrying and frightening these new ones, who have just come and are weary and confused, let us wait and see what the meeting decides.

“Even those of you who want to close Village to new ones—even you value the peace and kindness we have always embraced here. Mentor? You seem to be leading this. What do you say?”

Matty turned to look at Mentor, the teacher who meant so much to him. Mentor was thinking, and Matty was accustomed to seeing him deep in thought, for it was part of his classroom demeanor. He always thought over each question carefully, even the most foolish question from the youngest student.

Odd, Matty thought. The birthmark across Mentor’s cheek seemed lighter. Ordinarily it was a deep red. Now it seemed merely pink, as if it were fading. But it was late summer. Probably, Matty decided, Mentor’s skin had been tanned by the sun, as his own was; and this made the birthmark less visible.

Still, Matty was uneasy. Something *else* was different today about Mentor. He couldn’t name the difference, not really. Was it that Mentor seemed slightly *taller?* How strange that would be, Matty thought. But the teacher had always walked with a bit of a stoop. His shoulders were hunched over. People said that he had aged terribly after his beloved wife’s death, when Jean was just a small child. Sadness had done it.

Today he stood erect and his shoulders were straight. So he *seemed* taller, but wasn’t, Matty decided with relief. It was simply a changed posture.

“Yes,” Mentor said to Leader, “we will see what the meeting decides.”

His voice sounded different, Matty noticed.

He saw that Leader, too, was noticing something about Mentor and was puzzled. But everyone was turning away now, the crowd dispersing, people returning to their usual daily tasks. Matty ran to catch up with the blind man, who had started walking the familiar path home.

Behind him he heard an announcement being made. “Don’t forget!” someone was calling out. “Trade Mart tomorrow night!”

Trade Mart. With the other things that had consumed Matty's thoughts recently, he had almost forgotten about Trade Mart.

Now he decided he would attend.

Trade Mart was a very old custom. No one remembered its beginnings. The blind man said that he had first known of it when he was a newcomer to Village, still an invalid with wounds to be tended. He had lain on a bed in the infirmary, in pain, unseeing, his memory slow to return, and half listened to the conversations of the gentle folk who took care of him.

"Did you go to the last Trade Mart?" he had heard one person ask another.

"No, I have nothing to trade. Did you?"

"Went and watched. It all seems foolishness to me."

He had put it from his mind, then. He had nothing to trade, either. He owned nothing. His torn, blood-stained clothes had been taken from him and replaced. From a cord around his neck dangled an amulet of some sort, and he felt its importance but could not remember why. Certainly he would not trade it for some trinket; it was all he had left of his past.

The blind man had described all of that to Matty.

"Later I went, just to watch," he told him.

Matty laughed at him. They were close, by then, and he could do that. *"Watch?"* he hooted.

The blind man laughed in reply. "I have my own kind of watching," he said.

"I know you do. That's why they call you Seer. You see more than most. Can anyone go to Trade Mart and watch?"

"Of course. There are no secrets here. But it was dull stuff, Matty. People called out what they wanted to trade for. Women wanted new bracelets, I remember, and they traded their old bracelets away. Things like that."

"So it's like Market Day."

"It seemed so to me. I never went back."

Now, speaking of it the evening of the new ones' arrival, the blind man expressed concern. "It's changed, Matty. I hear people talk of it now, and I feel the changes. Something's wrong."

"What kind of talk?"

The blind man was sitting with his instrument on his lap. He played one chord. Then he frowned. “I’m not sure. There’s a secrecy to it now.”

“I got up my nerve and asked Ramon what his parents traded for the Gaming Machine. But he didn’t know. He said they wouldn’t tell him, and his mother turned away when he asked, as if she had something to hide.”

“I don’t like the sound of it.” The blind man stroked the strings and played two more chords.

“The sound of your own music?” Matty asked with a laugh, trying to lighten the conversation.

“Something’s happening at Trade Mart,” Seer said, ignoring Matty’s attempt at humor.

“Leader said the same.”

“He would know. I’d be wary of it, Matty, if I were you.”

The next evening, while they prepared supper, he told the blind man he was planning to go.

“I know you said I was too young, Seer. But I’m not. Ramon’s going. And maybe it’s important for me to go. Maybe I can figure out what’s happening.”

Seer sighed and nodded. “Promise me one thing,” he told Matty.

“I will.”

“Make no trade. Watch and listen. But make no trade. Even if you’re tempted.”

“I promise.” Then Matty laughed. “How could I? I have nothing to trade. What could I give for a Gaming Machine? A puppy too young to leave its mother? Who’d want that?”

The blind man stirred the chicken that simmered in a broth. “Ah, Matty, you have more than you know. And people will want what you have.”

Matty thought. Seer was correct, of course. He had the thing that troubled him—the *power,* he thought of it—and perhaps there were those who would want it. Maybe he should find a way to trade it away. But the thought made him nervous. He turned his thoughts to other, less worrying things.

He had a fishing pole, but he needed that and loved it. He had a kite, stored in the loft, and perhaps one day he would trade it for a better kite.

But not tonight. Tonight he would only watch. He had promised the blind man.

Seven

IT WAS EARLY evening, just past supper, and others were hurrying, as Matty was, along the lane to the place where Trade Mart was held. He nodded to neighbors as he passed them, and waved to some he saw farther along. People nodded back or waved in reply, but there was none of the light-hearted banter that was ordinarily part of Village. There was an intentness to everyone, an odd seriousness, and a sense of worry—unusual in Village—pervaded the atmosphere.

No wonder Seer didn't want me to come, Matty thought as he approached. *It doesn't feel right.*

He could hear the noise. A murmur. People whispering to each other. It was not at all like Market Day, with its sounds of laughter, conversation, and commerce: good-natured bargaining, the squealing of pigs, the motherly cluck of hens with their cheeping broods. Tonight it was simply a low hum, a nervous whisper through the crowd.

Matty slipped into a group that had gathered and was standing nearest to the platform, a simple wooden structure like a stage that was used for many occasions when the people came together. The coming meeting to discuss the proposal to close Village would be held here, too, and Leader would stand on the stage to direct things and keep them orderly.

A large wooden roof covered the area so that rain would not prevent a gathering, and in the cold months the enclosing sides would be slid into place. Tonight, though, with the weather still warm, it was open to the evening. A breeze ruffled Matty's hair. He could smell the scent of the pine grove that bordered the area.

He found a place to stand next to Mentor, hoping that perhaps Jean would join her father, though she was nowhere to be seen. Mentor glanced down and smiled at him. "Matty!" he said. "It's a surprise to see you here. You've never been before."

"No," Matty said. "I have nothing to trade."

The schoolteacher put his arm affectionately over Matty's shoulders, and Matty noticed for the first time that the teacher had lost weight. "Ah," Mentor said, "you'd be surprised. Everyone has something to trade."

“Jean has her flowers,” Matty said, hoping to turn the conversation to Mentor’s daughter. “But she takes them to the market stall. She doesn’t need Trade Mart for that.

“And,” he added, “she already promised the puppy to me. She’d better not trade him away.”

Mentor laughed. “No, the puppy is yours, Matty. And the sooner the better. He’s full of mischief, and he chewed my shoes just this morning.”

For a moment everything seemed as it had always been. The man was warm and cheerful, the same loving teacher and father he had been for years. His arm over Matty’s shoulders was familiar.

But Matty found himself wondering suddenly why Mentor was there. Why, in fact, *any* of these people were here. None of them had brought any goods to trade. He looked around to confirm what he had noticed. People stood tensely, their arms folded or at their sides. Some of them were murmuring to one another. Matty noticed the young couple who were neighbors down the road from the house he shared with the blind man. They were conversing in low voices, perhaps arguing, and the young wife appeared worried at what her husband was saying. But their arms, too, like Matty’s, like Mentor’s, like everyone’s, were empty. No one had brought anything to trade.

A silence fell and the crowd parted to make way for the tall, dark-haired man who was now striding toward the stage. He was called Trademaster. People said that he had come, already named, as a new one some years before, and had brought with him what he knew about trading from the place he had left. Matty had often seen him around Village and knew that he was in charge of Trade Mart and that he checked on things after, stopping at houses where trades had been made. He had come to Ramon’s after his parents acquired the Gaming Machine. Tonight he carried nothing but a thick book that Matty had never seen before.

Mentor’s arm fell from Matty’s shoulders and the schoolteacher’s attention turned eagerly toward the stage, where Trademaster was now standing.

“Trade Mart begins,” Trademaster called. He had a loud voice with a slight accent, as many in Village had, the traces of their former languages lingering with them. The crowd fell absolutely silent now. Even the slightest whispering ceased. But over on the edge, Matty heard a woman

begin to weep. He stood on tiptoe and peered toward her in time to see several people lead her away.

Mentor didn't even look toward the commotion of the weeping woman. Matty watched him. He noticed suddenly that Mentor's face looked slightly different, and he could not identify what the difference was. The evening light was dim.

More than that, the teacher, usually so calm, was now tense, alert, and appeared to be waiting for something.

"Who first?" Trademaster called, and while Matty watched, Mentor raised his hand and waved it frantically, like a schoolboy hoping for a reward. "Me! Me!" the schoolteacher called out in a demanding voice, and as Matty watched, Mentor shoved the people standing in front of him aside so that he would be noticed.

Late that night, the blind man listened with a concerned look on his face while Matty described Trade Mart.

"Mentor was first, because he raised his hand so fast. And he completely forgot me, Seer. He had been standing with me and we were talking, just as we always have. Then, when they started, it was as if I didn't exist. He pushed ahead of everyone and went first."

"What do you mean, went first? Where did he go?"

"To the stage. He pushed through everyone. He shoved and jostled them aside, Seer. It was so odd. Then he went to the stage when Trademaster called his name."

The blind man rocked back and forth in his chair. Tonight he had not played music at all. Matty knew he was distressed.

"It used to be different. People just called out. There was a lot of laughter and teasing the time I went."

"No laughter tonight, Seer. Just silence, as if people were very nervous. It was a little scary."

"And what happened when Mentor got to the stage?"

Matty thought. It had been a little difficult to see through the crowd. "He just stood there. Then Trademaster asked him something, but it was as if he already knew the answer. And then everyone laughed a bit, as if they did, too, but it wasn't a having-fun kind of laughter. It was a *knowing* kind."

"Could you hear what he asked?"

“I couldn’t hear that first time, but I know what it was because he asked it of everyone who came up. It was the same each time. Just three words. *Trade for what?* That’s what he asked each time.”

“And was the answer the same from everyone?”

Matty shook his head, then remembered that he had to reply aloud. “No,” he said. “It was different.”

“Could you hear Mentor’s reply?”

“Yes. It made everyone laugh in that odd way. Mentor said, ‘Same as before.’”

The blind man frowned. “Did you get a feel for what that meant?”

“I think so, because everyone looked at Stocktender’s widow, and she blushed. She was near me, so I could see it. Her friends poked at her, teasing, and I heard her say, ‘He needs a few more trades first.’”

“Then what happened?”

Matty tried to remember the sequence of things. “Trademaster seemed to say yes, or at least to nod his head, and then he opened his book and wrote it in.”

“I’d like to see that book,” the blind man said, and then, laughing at himself, added, “or have you see it, and read it to me.

“What came next?”

“Mentor stood there. He seemed relieved that Trademaster had written something down for him.”

“How could you tell?”

“He smiled and seemed less nervous.”

“Then what?”

“Then everyone got very silent and Trademaster asked, ‘Trade away what?’”

The blind man thought. “Another three words. Was it the same for each? The same ‘Trade for what?’ and then ‘Trade away what?’”

“Yes. But each one said the answer to the first quite loudly, the way Mentor did, but they whispered the answer to the second, so no one could hear.”

“So it became public, what they were trading for . . .”

“Yes, and sometimes the crowd called out in a scornful way. They *jeered.* I think that’s the right word.”

“And he wrote each down?”

“No. Ramon’s mother went up, and when Trademaster asked, ‘Trade for what?’ she said, ‘Fur jacket.’ But Trademaster said no.”

“Did he give a reason for the no?”

“He said she got a Gaming Machine already. Maybe another time, he said. Keep trying, he told her.”

The blind man stirred restlessly in his chair. “Make us some tea, Matty, would you?”

Matty did so, going to the woodstove where the iron kettle was already simmering. He poured the water over tea leaves in two thick mugs and gave one to Seer.

“Tell me again the second three-word thing,” the blind man said after he had taken a sip.

Matty repeated it. “‘*Trade away what?*’” He tried to make his voice loud and important, as Trademaster’s had been. He tried to imitate the slight accent.

“But you couldn’t hear any of the answers that people gave, is that right?”

“That’s right. They whispered, and he wrote the whispers in his book.”

Matty straightened in his chair with a sudden idea. “How about if I steal the book and read you what it says?”

“Matty, Matty . . .”

“Sorry,” Matty replied immediately. Stealing had been so much a part of his previous existence that he sometimes still, even after years, forgot that it was not acceptable behavior in Village.

“Well,” said the blind man after they had sipped their tea in silence for a moment, “I wish I could figure out what things people are trading away. You say they came empty-handed. Yet each one whispered something that was written down.”

“Except for Ramon’s mother,” Matty reminded him. “Trademaster said no to her. But others got their trades. Mentor got his.”

“But we don’t know what.”

“No. ‘Same as before,’ he asked for.”

“Tell me this, Matty. When Mentor left the Trade Mart, he hadn’t been given anything, had he? He wasn’t carrying anything?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Was anyone given anything to take away?”

“Some were told delivery times. Someone got a Gaming Machine.

“I’d really like a Gaming Machine, Seer,” Matty added, though he knew it was hopeless.

But the blind man paid no attention to that. “One more question for you, Matty. Think hard about this.”

“All right.” Matty prepared himself to think hard.

“Try to remember if people *looked different* when it was over. Not everyone, but those who had made trades.”

Matty sighed. It had been crowded, and long, and he had begun to be uncomfortable and tired by the time it ended. He had seen Ramon and waved, but Ramon was standing with his mother, who was angry at having been turned down by Trademaster. Ramon hadn’t waved back.

He had looked for Jean, but she wasn’t there.

“I can’t remember. I wasn’t paying attention by the end.”

“What about the person who got a Gaming Machine? You told me someone did. Who was it?”

“That woman who lives over near the marketplace. You know the one? Her husband walks hunched over because he has a twisted back. He was with her but he didn’t go up for a trade.”

“Yes, I know who you mean. They’re a nice family,” the blind man said. “So she traded for a Gaming Machine. Did you see her when she was leaving?”

“I think so. She was with some other women and they were laughing as they walked away.”

“I thought you said she was with her husband.”

“She was, but he walked behind.”

“How did she seem?”

“Happy, because she got a Gaming Machine. She was telling her friends that they could come play with it.”

“But anything else? Was there anything else about her that you remember, from *after* the trade, not before?”

Matty shrugged. He was beginning to be bored by the questioning. He was thinking about Jean, and that he might go to see her in the morning. Maybe his puppy would be ready. At least the puppy would be an excuse for a visit. It was healthy now, and growing fast, with big feet and ears; recently he had watched, laughing, when the mother dog had growled at it because it was nipping at her own ears in play.

Thinking of the puppy’s behavior reminded Matty of something.

“Something *was* different,” he said. “She’s a nice woman, the one who got the Gaming Machine.”

“Yes, she is. Gentle. Cheerful. Very loving to her husband.”

“Well,” said Matty slowly, “when she was leaving, walking and talking with the other women, and her husband behind trying to keep up, she whirled around suddenly and scolded him for being slow.”

“Slow? But he’s all twisted. He can’t walk any other way,” the blind man said in surprise.

“I know. But she made a sneering face at him and she imitated his way of walking. She made fun of him. It was only for a second, though.”

Seer was silent, rocking. Matty picked up the empty mugs, took them to the sink, and rinsed them.

“It’s late,” the blind man said. “Time to go to bed.” He rose from his chair and put his stringed instrument on the shelf where he kept it. He began to walk slowly to his sleeping room. “Good night, Matty,” he said.

Then he said something else, almost to himself.

“So now she has a Gaming Machine,” the blind man murmured. His voice sounded scornful.

Matty, at the sink, remembered something. “Mentor’s birthmark is completely gone,” he called to Seer.

Eight

THE PUPPY WAS ready. So was Matty. The other little dog, the one who had been his childhood companion for years, had lived a happy, active life, died in his sleep, and had been buried with ceremony and sadness beyond the garden. For a long time Matty, missing Branch, had not wanted a new dog. But now it was time, and when Jean summoned him—her message was that Matty had to come right away to pick up the puppy, because her father was furious at its mischief—he hurried to her house.

He had not been to Mentor's homeplace since Trade Mart the previous week. The flower garden, as always, was thriving and well tended, with late roses in bloom and fall asters fat with bud. He found Jean there, kneeling by her flower bed, digging with a trowel. She smiled up at him, but it was not her usual saucy smile, fraught with flirtatiousness, the smile that drove Matty nearly mad. This morning she seemed troubled.

"He's shut in the shed," she told Matty, meaning the puppy. "Did you bring a rope to lead him home?"

"Don't need one. He'll follow me. I have a way with dogs."

Jean sighed, set her trowel aside, and wiped her forehead, leaving a smear of earth that Matty found very appealing. "I wish I did," she said. "I can't control him at all. He's grown so fast, and he's very strong and determined. My father is beside himself, wanting such a wild little thing gone."

Matty grinned. "Mentor deals with lots of wild little things in the schoolhouse. I myself was a wild little thing once, and it was he who tamed me."

Jean smiled at him. "I remember. What a ragged, naughty thing you were, Matty, when you came to Village."

"I called myself the Fiercest of the Fierce."

"You were that," Jean agreed with a laugh. "And now your puppy is."

"Is your father home?"

"No, he's off visiting Stocktender's widow, as usual," Jean said with a sigh.

"She's a nice woman."

Jean nodded. "She is. I like her. But, Matty . . ."

Matty, who had been standing, sat down on the grass at the edge of the garden. “What?”

“May I tell you something troubling?”

He felt himself awash with affection for Jean. He had for a long time been attracted to her girlish affectations, her silly charms and wiles. But now, for the first time, he felt something new. He perceived the young woman behind all those superficial things. With her curly hair tumbling over her dirt-streaked forehead, she was the most beautiful person Matty had ever seen. And now she was talking to him in a way that was not foolish and childlike, designed to entrance, but instead was human and pained and adult. He felt suddenly that he loved her, and it was a feeling he had never known before.

“It’s about my father,” she said in a low voice.

“He’s changing, isn’t he?” Matty replied, startling himself, because he had not spelled it out in his mind before, had not said it aloud yet, yet here it was, and he was saying it to Jean. He felt an odd sense of relief.

Jean began to cry softly. “Yes,” she said. “He has traded his deepest self.”

“Traded?” That part took Matty by surprise because he had not thought it through to there. “Traded for what?” Matty asked in horror, and realized he was repeating the phrase from Trade Mart.

“For Stocktender’s widow,” she said, weeping. “He wanted her to love him, so he traded. He’s becoming taller and straighter. The bald spot at the back of his head has grown over with hair, Matty. His birthmark has disappeared.”

Of course. That was it. “I saw it,” Matty told her, “but I didn’t understand.” He put his arm around the sobbing girl.

She caught her breath finally. “I didn’t know how lonely he was, Matty. If I had known . . .”

“So that’s why . . .” Matty was trying to sort through it in his head.

“The puppy. Once he would have loved a naughty puppy, Matty, the way he loved you when you were a raggedy boy. I knew it all for certain yesterday when he kicked the puppy. Till then I only suspected.” Jean wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and left another endearing streak of dirt.

“And the petition!” Matty added, thinking of it suddenly.

“Yes. Father always welcomed new ones. It was the most wonderful part of Father, how he cared for everyone and tried to help them learn. But now . . .”

They heard a loud whimpering from the shed, and a scratching sound.

“Let him out, Jean, and I’ll take him home before your father gets back.”

She went to the shed door, opened it, and though her face was tear-streaked now, she smiled at the eager, ungainly puppy who bounded forth, jumped into Matty’s arms, and licked his cheeks. The white tail was a whir.

“I need time to think,” Matty said, subduing the puppy with a rhythmic scratch below his chin.

“What’s to think about? There’s nothing to be done. Trades are forever. Even if a stupid thing like a Gaming Machine breaks down, or if you tire of it—you don’t get to reverse.”

He wondered if he should tell her. She had seen the effect of his power on the puppy and its mother, but hadn’t understood. Now, if he chose, perhaps he could explain. But he was uncertain about this. He did not know how far his power went and he did not want to promise this beloved girl something impossible. To repair a man’s soul and deepest heart—to reverse an irreversible trade—might be far, far more than Matty could possibly undertake.

So he stayed silent, and took his lively puppy away.

“Look! He sits now when I tell him to.” Then Matty groaned and said, “Oh, sorry.”

When would he ever learn to stop saying “Look” to a man who had no eyes?

But the blind man laughed. “I don’t need to be able to look. I can hear that he sits. The sounds of his feet stop. And I don’t feel his teeth on my shoes.”

“He’s smart, I think,” Matty said optimistically.

“Yes, I think you’re right. He’s a good little puppy, Matty. He’ll learn quickly. You don’t need to worry about his mischief.” The blind man reached out his hand and the puppy scampered to it and licked his fingers.

“And he’s quite beautiful.” In truth, Matty was trying to convince himself. The puppy was a combination of several colors, big feet, a

whirligig of a tail, and lopsided ears.

"I'm sure he is."

"He'll need a name. I haven't thought of the right one yet."

"His true name will come to you."

"I hope I get my own soon," Matty said.

"It will come when the time comes."

Matty nodded and turned back to the dog. "First I thought of Survivor, because he was the only one of the puppies that did. But it's too long. It doesn't sound like the right one." Matty picked up the puppy and scratched its belly as it lay on his lap.

"So then . . ." Matty began to laugh. "Since he was the one that lived? I thought of Liver for a name."

"Liver?" The blind man laughed as well.

"I know, I know. It was a stupid idea. Liver with onions." Matty made a face.

He set the puppy on the floor again and it dashed off, tail wagging, to growl at the logs piled beside the stove and to chew at their edges where raw wood curled.

"You could ask Leader," the blind man suggested. "He's the one who gives true names to people. Maybe he'd do it for a puppy."

"That's a good idea. I have to go see Leader anyway. It's time to take messages around for the meeting. I'll take the puppy with me."

Clumsy with his stubby legs and oversized feet, the puppy couldn't manage the stairs at Leader's homeplace. Matty picked him up and carried him, then set him on the floor in the upper room where Leader was waiting at his desk. The stacks of messages were ready. Matty could have taken them and left on his errand without pausing. But he lingered. He enjoyed Leader's company. There were things he wanted to tell him. He began to put them in order in his mind.

"Do you want to put a paper down for him?" Leader asked, watching with amusement as the little thing scampered about the room.

"No, he's fine. He never has an accident. It was the first thing he learned."

Leader leaned back in his chair and stretched. "He'll be good company for you, Matty, the way Branch was.

“Do you know,” he went on, “in the place where I was a child, there were no dogs? No animals at all.”

“No chickens? Or goats?”

“No, nothing.”

“What did you eat, then?” Matty asked.

“We had fish. Lots of fish, from a hatchery. And plenty of vegetables. But no animal meat. And no pets at all. I never knew what it meant to have a pet. Or even to love something and be loved back.”

His words made Matty think of Jean. He felt his face flush a little. “Did you never love a girl?” he asked.

He thought Leader would laugh. But instead the young man’s face became reflective.

“I had a sister,” Leader said, after a moment. “I think of her still, and hope she’s happy.”

He picked up a pencil from the desk, twirled it in his fingers, and gazed through the window. His clear blue eyes seemed to be able to see great distances, even into the past, or perhaps the future.

Matty hesitated. Then he explained, “I meant a *girl*. Not like a sister. But a—well, a *girl*.”

Leader put the pencil down and smiled. “I understand what you mean. There was a girl once, long ago. I was younger than you, Matty, but I was at the age when such things begin.”

“What happened to her?”

“She changed. And I did too.”

“Sometimes I think I want nothing to change, ever,” Matty said with a sigh. Then he remembered what he had wanted to tell Leader.

“Leader, I went to Trade Mart,” he said. “I hadn’t been before.”

Leader shrugged. “I wish they’d vote to end it,” he said. “I never go anymore, but I did in the past. It seemed folly and time-wasting. Now it seems worse.”

“It’s the only way to get something like a Gaming Machine.”

Leader made a face. “A Gaming Machine,” he commented with disdain.

“Well, I’d like one,” Matty grumbled. “But Seer says no.”

The puppy wandered to a corner of the room, sniffed, made a circle of himself, collapsed, and fell asleep. Matty and Leader, together, watched it and smiled.

“It isn’t just Gaming Machines and such.” Matty had wondered how to say it, how to describe it. Now, into the silence, as they watched the sleeping puppy, he found himself simply blurting it out. “Something else is happening at Trade Mart. People are changing, Leader. Mentor is.”

“I’ve seen the changes in him,” Leader acknowledged. “What are you telling me, Matty?”

“Mentor has traded away his deepest self,” Matty said, “and I think that others are, too.”

Leader leaned forward and listened intently as Matty described what he had seen, what he suspected, and what he knew.

“Leader gave me a name for him, but I don’t know if I like it.”

Matty was back home by lunchtime, after delivering the last of the messages. The blind man was at the sink, washing some clothes.

“And what is it?” he asked, turning toward Matty’s voice.

“Frolic.”

“Hmmmm. It has a nice sound to it. How does the puppy feel about it?”

Matty lifted the puppy from where it had been riding, curled up inside his jacket. For most of the morning it had followed him, scampering at his heels, but eventually its short legs had tired, and Matty had carried it the rest of the way.

The puppy blinked—he had been asleep in the jacket—and Matty set him on the floor.

“Frolic?” Matty said, and the puppy looked up. His tail churned.

“Sit, Frolic!” Matty said. The puppy sat instantly. He looked intently at Matty.

“He did!” Matty told the blind man in delight.

“Lie down, Frolic!”

After a flicker of a pause, the puppy reluctantly sank to the floor and touched the rug with his small nose.

“He knows his true name already!” Matty knelt beside the puppy and stroked the little head. “Good puppy,” he said. The big brown eyes gazed up at him and the spotted body, still sprawled obediently on the floor, quivered with affection.

“Good Frolic,” Matty said.

Nine

THERE WAS MUCH talk in Village about the coming meeting. Matty heard it everywhere, people arguing about the petition.

By now, some of the latest group of new ones were out and about, their sores clearing up, their clothes clean and hair combed, frightened faces eased, and their haunted, desperate attitudes changing to something more serene. Their children played, now, with other children of Village, racing down the lanes and paths in games of tag and hide-and-seek. Watching them, Matty remembered his own child self, his bravado and the terrible anguish it had concealed. He had not believed anyone would want him, ever, until he came to Village, and even then he had not trusted in its kindness for a long time.

With Frolic scampering at his heels, Matty made his way toward the marketplace to buy some bread.

"Good morning!" he called cheerfully to a woman he encountered on the path. She was one of the new ones, and he remembered her from the recent welcome. Her eyes had been wide in her gaunt face that day. She was scarred, as if by untended wounds, and one arm was held crookedly, so that it was awkward for her to do things.

But today she looked relaxed, and was making her unhurried way along the path. She smiled at Matty's greeting.

"Stop it, Frolic! *Down!*" Matty scolded his puppy, who had jumped to grab and tug at the frayed edge of the woman's skirt. Grudgingly Frolic obeyed him.

The woman leaned down to pat Frolic's head. "It's all right," she said softly. "I had a dog once. I had to leave him behind." She had a slight accent. Like so many of the people in Village, she had brought her way of speaking from her old place.

"Are you settling in?"

"Yes," she told him. "People are kind. They're patient with me. I've been injured, and I have to relearn some things. It will take time."

"Patience is important here, because we have so many in Village who have difficulties," Matty explained. "My father . . ."

He paused and corrected himself. “I mean the man I live with. He is called Seer. You’ve probably met him. He’s blind. He strides around everywhere on the paths without a problem. But when he first arrived and had just lost his eyes . . .”

“I have a concern,” the woman said suddenly, and he knew it was not a concern about the condition of the paths or directions to the buildings. He could see that she was worried.

“You can take any concern to Leader.”

She shook her head. “Maybe you can answer. It’s about the closing of Village. I hear talk of a petition.”

“But you’re already here!” Matty reassured her. “You needn’t worry! You’re part of us now. They won’t send you away, even if they close Village.”

“I brought my boy with me. Vladik. He’s about your age. Maybe you’ve noticed him?”

Matty shook his head. He hadn’t noticed the boy. There had been a large crowd of new ones. He wondered why the woman would be worried for her son. Perhaps he was having trouble adjusting to Village. Some new ones did. Matty himself had.

“When I came,” he told her, “I was scared. Lonely, too, I think. And I behaved badly. I lied and stole. But look—now I am fine. I’m hoping to get my true name soon.”

“No, no. My boy’s a good boy,” she said. “He doesn’t lie or steal. And he’s strong and eager. They have him working in the fields already. And soon he’ll go to school.”

“Well, then, no need to worry about him.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t worry about him. It’s my others. I brought Vladik but I had to leave my other children behind. We came first, my boy and I, to find the way. It was such a long, hard trip.

“The others are to come later. The little ones. My sister will bring them after I have made a place here.”

Her voice faltered. “But now I hear people saying that the border will close. I don’t know what to do. I think maybe I should go back. Leave Vladik here, to make a life, and go back to my little ones.”

Matty hesitated. He didn’t know what to say to her. Could she go back? She had been here only briefly, so it was not yet too late. Surely Forest would not entangle the poor woman yet. But if she did, what would she go

back to? He didn't know how the woman had been injured. But he knew that in some places—it had been true, too, in Matty's old place—people were punished in terrible ways. He glanced at her scars, at her unset broken arm, and wondered if she had been stoned.

Of course she wanted to bring her children to the safety of Village.

"They'll be voting tomorrow," Matty explained. "You and I can't vote because we don't yet have our true names. But we can go and listen to the debate. We can speak if we want. And we can watch the vote."

He told her how to find the platform before which the people would gather. Using her good hand, the woman grasped Matty's hands with a warm gesture of thanks as she turned away.

At the market stall he bought a loaf of bread from Jean, who tucked a chrysanthemum blossom into the wrapping. She smiled at Frolic and leaned down to let him lick some crumbs from her fingers.

"Are you going to the meeting tomorrow?" he asked her.

"I suppose so. It's all my father talks about." Jean sighed and began to rearrange her wares on the table.

"Once it was books and poetry," she said with sudden and passionate anguish. "I remember when I was small, after my mother died, he would tell me stories and recite poems at dinner. Then, later, he told me about the people who had written them.

"By the time we studied it in school—you remember, Matty, studying literature?—it was all so familiar to me, because of the way he had taught me when I didn't even know he was teaching."

Matty remembered. "He used different voices. Remember Lady Macbeth? *'Out, damn'd spot! Out, I say!'"* He tried to repeat the lines with the sinister yet regal voice Mentor had used.

Jean laughed. "And Macduff! I cried when my father recited Macduff's speech about the deaths of his wife and children."

Matty remembered that speech as well. Standing by the bakery stall with Frolic scampering about at their feet, Matty and Jean recited the lines together.

All my pretty ones?

Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?

What! all my pretty chickens and their dam

At one fell swoop? . . .

I cannot but remember such things were,

That were most precious to me.

Then Jean turned away. She continued restacking the loaves on her table, but clearly her thoughts were someplace else. Finally she looked up at Matty and said in a puzzled voice, “It was so important to him, and he made it important to me: poetry, and language, and how we use it to remind ourselves of how our lives should be lived . . .”

Then her tone changed and became embittered. “Now he talks of nothing but Stocktender’s widow, and of closing Village to new ones. What has happened to my father?”

Matty shook his head. He did not know the answer.

The recitation of Macduff’s famous speech had reminded him of the woman he had spoken to on the path, the woman who feared for her lost children’s future. *All my pretty ones.*

Suddenly he felt that they were all of them doomed.

He had forgotten completely about his own power. He had forgotten the frog.

Ten

THE MEETING TO discuss and vote on the petition began in the orderly, careful way such meetings had always been handled. Leader stood on the platform, read the petition in his strong, clear voice, and opened the meeting to debate. One by one the people of Village stood and gave their opinions.

The new ones had come. Matty could see the woman he had met on the path, standing beside a tall, light-haired boy who must be Vladik. The two were with a group of new ones who had a place apart, since they could not vote.

Small children, bored, played along the edge of the pine grove. Matty had once been like them, when he was new here and hadn't liked meetings or debates. But now he stood with Seer and the other adults. He paid attention. He had not even brought Frolic, who usually accompanied Matty everywhere. Today the puppy was left at home, whimpering behind the closed door as they walked away.

It was frighteningly obvious now, with the population gathered, that something terrible was happening. At Trade Mart it had been evening, dark, and Matty had been so interested in the proceedings that he had not noticed many individuals, only those who went to the platform, like Mentor, and the woman who had been so oddly cruel to her husband as they started home.

Now, though, it was bright daylight. Matty was able to watch everyone, and to his horror he could see the changes.

Near him stood his friend Ramon, with his parents and younger sister. It was Ramon's mother who had asked to trade for a fur jacket and been denied. But they had had a Gaming Machine for quite a while, and so a trade had been made in the past. Matty looked carefully at his friend's family. He had not seen Ramon since the day recently when he had suggested a fishing expedition and been told that Ramon was not well.

Ramon glanced at Matty and smiled. But Matty held his breath for a moment, dismayed to see that indeed his friend was ill. Ramon's face was no longer tanned and rosy-cheeked but instead seemed thin and gray.

Beside him, his little sister seemed sick, too; her eyes were sunken and Matty could hear her cough.

Once, he knew, her mother would have leaned down to tend the little girl at the sound of such a cough. Now, while Matty watched, the woman simply shook the child roughly by a shoulder and said, “Shhhh.”

One by one the people spoke, and one by one Matty identified those who had traded. Some of those who had been among the most industrious, the kindest, and the most stalwart citizens of Village now went to the platform and shouted out their wish that the border be closed so that “we” (Matty shuddered at the use of “we”) would not have to share the resources anymore.

We need all the fish for ourselves.

Our school is not big enough to teach their children, too; only our own.

They can’t even speak right. We can’t understand them.

They have too many needs. We don’t want to take care of them.

And finally: *We’ve done it long enough.*

Now and then a lone citizen, untouched by trade, would go to the platform and try to speak. They spoke of the history of Village, how each of them there had fled poverty and cruelty and been welcomed at this new place that had taken them in.

The blind man spoke eloquently of the day he had been brought here half dead and been tended for months by the people of Village until, though he was still without sight, it had become his true home. Matty had been wondering whether he, too, would go up and speak. He wanted to, for surely Village had also become his true home, and saved him, but he felt a little shy. Then he heard the blind man begin to speak on his behalf:

“My boy came here six years ago as a child. Many of you remember the Matty he was then. He fought and swore and stole.”

Matty liked the sound of the phrase “my boy,” which he had never heard the blind man use before. But he was embarrassed to see people turn and look at him.

“Village changed him and made him what he is now,” the blind man said. “He will receive his true name soon.”

For a moment Matty hoped that Leader, who was still standing on the platform, would hold up his hand to call for silence, would call Matty, place his hand on Matty’s forehead, then announce the true name. It happened that way, sometimes.

Messenger. Matty held his breath, hoping for that.

But instead he heard another voice, not Leader's.

"I remember what he was like! If we close the border, we won't have to do that anymore! We won't have to deal with thieves and braggarts and people who have lice in their hair, the way Matty did then, when he came!"

Matty turned to look. It was a woman. He was stunned, as if someone had slapped him. It was his own neighbor, the very woman who had made clothes for him when he came. He remembered standing there in his rags while she measured him and then put on her thimble to stitch the clothing for him. She had a soft voice then, and talked gently to him while she sewed.

Now she had a sewing machine, a very fancy one, and bolts of fabric with which she created fine clothing. Now the blind man stitched the simple things that he and Matty needed.

So she, too, had traded, and was turning not only on him, but on all new ones.

Her voice incited others, and now large numbers of people were calling out, "Close Village! Close the border!"

Matty had never seen Leader look so sad.

When it was over, and the vote to close Village had been finalized, Matty trudged home beside the blind man. At first they were silent. There was nothing to be said. Their world had changed now.

After a bit Matty tried to talk, to be cheerful, to make the best of things.

"I suppose he'll send me out now to all the other villages and communities with the message. I'll be doing a lot of traveling. I'm glad it isn't winter yet. It's hard in snow."

"He came in snow," the blind man said. "He knows what it's like."

Matty wondered for a moment what he was talking about. Who? *Oh yes*, he thought. *The little sled.*

"Leader knows better than anyone about things," Matty remarked. "And he's still younger than many."

"He sees beyond," Seer said.

"What?"

"He has a special gift. Some people do. Leader sees beyond."

Matty was startled. He had noticed the quality of Leader's pale blue eyes, how they seemed to have a kind of vision most people didn't have.

But he had not heard it described that way before.

It made him think of what he had only recently come to know about himself.

"So some people, like Leader, have a special gift?"

"It's true," Seer replied.

"Is it always the same? Is it always—what did you say?—seeing beyond?"

They were nearing the curve in the path where it branched off and led to their homeplace. Matty watched in awe, as he always did, how the blind man felt the coming curve and knew even in his darkness where to turn.

"No. It's different for different people."

"Do you have it? Is that how you know where to walk?"

The blind man laughed. "No. I've learned that. I've been without eyes for many years. At first I stumbled and bumped into things. People had to help me all the time. Of course in the old days in Village, people were quick to help and guide."

His voice became bitter. "Who knows what will happen now?"

They had arrived at the house and could hear Frolic scratching at the door and woofing in excitement at the sound of their approach.

Matty didn't want the conversation to end here. He wanted to tell the blind man about himself, about his secret.

"So you don't have a special gift, like Leader, but other people do?"

"My daughter does. She told me of it that night, the night you took me to her."

"Kira? She has a special gift?"

"Yes, your old friend Kira. The one who taught you manners."

Matty ignored that. "She must be all grown up now. I saw her last time I was there, but it's been almost two years. But, Seer, what do you mean . . ."

The blind man stopped unexpectedly on the steps leading to the door. *"Matty!"* he said with sudden urgency.

"What?"

"I've just realized. The border will be closing in three weeks."

"Yes."

Seer sat down on the steps. He put his head in his hands. Sometimes he did that when he was thinking. Matty sat beside him and waited. He could hear Frolic inside, throwing himself against the door in frustration.

Finally the blind man spoke. “I want you to go to your old village, Matty. Leader will be sending you anyway, with the message.

“He’ll no doubt send you to several places. But, Matty, I want you to go to your old village first. Leader will understand.”

“But I don’t.”

“My daughter. She said some day she would come here to live, when the time was right. You know her, Matty. You know she had things to accomplish there first.”

“Yes. And she has, Seer. I could tell when I was last there. Things have changed. People take good care of their children now. And . . .”

He hesitated, unable to speak for a moment, because the memory of his own abuse had returned. Then he added simply, “Kira made things change. Things are better now.”

“There are only three weeks left, Matty. After the border closes it will be too late. She won’t be allowed to come. You must bring her here before that happens.

“If you don’t, Matty, I will never see her again.”

“It always seems strange to me when you say ‘see.’”

The blind man smiled. “I see in my heart, Matty.”

Matty nodded. “I know you do. I’ll bring her to you. I’ll leave here tomorrow.”

Together they rose. Evening was coming. Matty opened the door and Frolic leaped into his arms.

Eleven

"TUCK IT INSIDE your shirt, Matty, so it won't get rumpled. You have a long journey ahead."

Matty took the packet of folded messages in the thick envelope, and placed it where Leader indicated, inside his shirt next to his chest. He didn't say so to Leader, but he thought that later, when he gathered his traveling things, he would probably find a different place for the envelope. He would put it with his food supplies and blanket. It was true that here, inside his shirt, was the safest and cleanest place. But he had planned to carry Frolic there, against his chest.

There was not time, in three weeks, to make journeys to all the other places and communities. Some of them were many days away, and a few places could be reached only by riverboat. Matty was not qualified to go by river; the man called Boater was always the one who took messages and trading goods by that route.

But it had been decided that the message would be posted on every path throughout Forest, so that any new ones coming would see it and turn back. Matty was the only one who knew all the paths, who was not afraid to enter Forest and travel in that dangerous place. He would post the messages there. And he would go on to his own old place as well. There had been ongoing communication between that place and Village for years; now they must be told of the new ruling.

Leader was standing now at the window, as he so often did, looking down at Village and the people below. Matty waited. He was in a hurry to be off, to begin his long journey, but he had a feeling there was something that Leader wanted to tell him, something still unsaid.

Finally Leader turned to Matty, standing beside him. "He's told you that I see beyond, hasn't he?"

"Yes. He says you have a special gift. His daughter does, too."

"His daughter. That would be the girl called Kira, the one who helped you leave your old place. He never talks about her."

"It makes him too sad. But he thinks about her all the time."

"And you say she has a gift, too?"

"Yes. But hers is different. Each gift is different, Seer said."

Do you know about mine? Matty thought. But he did not need to ask.

As if he had read Matty's mind, Leader told him, "I know of yours."

Matty shuddered. The gift still frightened him so. "I kept it secret," he said apologetically. "I haven't even told Seer. I didn't want to be secretive. But I'm still trying to understand it. I try to put it out of my mind. I try to forget that it's there inside me. But then it just appears. I can feel it coming. I don't know how to stop it."

"Don't try. If it comes without your summoning it, it is because of need. Because someone needs your gift."

"A *frog?* It was a frog first!"

"It was to show you. It always starts with a small thing. For me? The very first time I saw beyond? It was an apple."

Despite the solemnity of the conversation, Matty chuckled. A frog and an apple. *And a puppy,* he realized.

"Wait for the true need, Matty. Don't spend the gift."

"But how will I know?"

Leader smiled. He rubbed Matty's shoulder affectionately. "You'll know," he said.

Matty looked around for Frolic and saw that he was curled in the corner, asleep. "I should go. I haven't packed my things yet. And I want to stop by and tell Jean I'm going, so she won't wonder where I am."

Leader kept him there within the comfortable curve of his arm. "Matty, wait," he said. "I want to . . ." Then he gazed through the window again. Matty stood there, wondering what he was to wait for. Then he felt something. The weight of the young man's arm took on a quality of something beyond human flesh. It came alive with power. Matty felt it from the arm, but he knew, as well, that it was pervading all of Leader's being. He understood that it was Leader's gift at work.

Finally, after what seemed an unendurable few moments, Leader lifted his arm away from Matty. He exhaled. His body sagged slightly. Matty helped him to a chair and he sat there, exhausted, breathing hard.

"Forest is thickening," Leader said when he could speak.

Matty didn't know what he meant. It sounded ominous. But when he looked through the window, to the row of underbrush and pines that was the border of Forest, it looked no different to him.

"I don't understand it exactly," Leader said. "But I can see a thickening to Forest, like a . . ." He hesitated.

“I was going to say like a clotting of blood. Things turning sluggish and sick.”

Matty looked through the window again. “The trees are just the same, Leader. There’s a storm coming, though. You can hear the wind. And look. The sky is turning dark. Maybe that’s what you saw.”

Leader shook his head skeptically. “No. It was Forest I saw. I’m sure. It’s hard to describe, Matty, but I was trying to look *through* Forest in order to get a feeling for Seer’s daughter. And it was very, very hard to push through. It was—well, *thick.*

“I think you had better not go, Matty, I’m sorry. I know you love making your journeys, and that you take pride in being the only one who can. But I think there may be danger in Forest this time.”

Matty’s heart sank. He had hoped to be given his true name, Messenger, because of this trip. At the same time, something told him that Leader might be right.

Then he remembered. “Leader, I *have* to!”

“No. We can post the messages at the entrance to Village. It will mean new ones will have to turn back after terribly long journeys, and that’s tragic. But—”

“No, it’s not the messages! It’s Seer’s daughter! I promised him I would go and bring Kira home. It will be her last chance to come. His last chance to be with her.”

“And she will want to come?”

“I’m sure she will. She always intended to someday. And she has no family there. She’s old enough to marry, but no one would want her. Her leg is crooked. She walks with a stick.”

Leader took several deep breaths. “Matty,” he said, “I’m going to try again to see beyond Forest. I’m going to try to see Seer’s daughter and her needs. You may stay with me now, because whether you make this journey will depend on what I learn. But be aware that it is very hard for me to do this twice in a row. Don’t be distressed as you watch.”

He stood again and went to the window. Matty, knowing he could be of no help, went to the corner where Frolic was asleep and sat down beside his puppy. From there he watched Leader’s body tense, as if he were in pain. He heard Leader gasp and then moan slightly.

The young man’s blue eyes remained open but no longer seemed to be looking at the ordinary things in the room or through the window. He had

gone, eyes and whole being, far into a place that Matty could not perceive and where no one could follow him.

He seemed to shimmer.

Finally he slumped into the chair, shaking, and tried to catch his breath.

Matty went to him, stood beside him, and waited while Leader rested. He remembered how he felt after he had healed the puppy and its mother. He remembered the desperate need to sleep.

"I reached where she is," Leader said when he could speak again.

"Did she know you were there? Could she feel you there?"

Leader shook his head. "No. To make her aware of me would have taken more energy than I had. It's so very far, and Forest is so thick now, to go through."

Matty had a sudden thought. "Leader? Do you think two gifts could *meet?*"

Leader, still breathing hard, stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. But what if you could go halfway—and she could, too? So you could meet in the middle with your gifts? It wouldn't be so hard if you only went halfway. If you *met*."

Leader's eyes were closed, now. "I don't know, Matty," he said.

Matty waited but Leader said nothing more, and after a while Matty feared he was asleep. "Frolic?" he called, and the puppy woke, stirred, and came to him.

"Leader," Matty said, leaning close to him, "I'm going to go. I'm going to get the blind man's daughter."

"Be very careful," Leader murmured. His eyes were closed. "It is dangerous now."

"I will. I always am."

"Don't waste your gift. Don't spend it."

"I won't," Matty replied, though he was not certain what the words meant.

"Matty?"

"Yes?" He was at the top of the stairs now, holding Frolic, who still couldn't manage the staircase on his own.

"She's quite lovely, isn't she?"

Matty shrugged. He understood that Leader was referring to Kira but the blind man's daughter was older than he. She had been like a big sister to

him. No one in the old place had thought her lovely. They had been contemptuous of her weakness.

“She has a crooked leg,” Matty reminded Leader. “She leans on a stick to walk.”

“Yes,” Leader said. “She’s very lovely.” But his voice was hard to hear now, and in a second he was asleep. Matty, holding Frolic, hurried down the stairs.

It was late in the day by the time Matty was ready to go. It had rained heavily, and though the rain had stopped, wind still blew, and the leaves of the trees fluttered and revealed their pale undersides. The sky was dark, from the storm and from the approach of evening.

He placed the packet of messages inside his rolled blanket. By the sink, the blind man was putting food into Matty’s backpack. He could not carry enough for the entire journey; it was too long. But Matty was accustomed to living on the food that Forest provided. He would feed himself along the way when what Seer packed was gone.

“While you’re away, I’ll be fixing the spare room for her. Tell her that, Matty. She’ll have a comfortable place to live. And she can have a garden. I know that’s important to her. She’s never been without a garden.”

“I won’t need to convince her. She’s always said she’d come when the time was right. Now it is. Leader could tell. So she’ll know, too. You said she has a gift.” Matty, folding a sweater, tried to reassure the blind man.

“It’s hard to leave the only place you’ve known.”

“You did it,” Matty reminded him.

“I had no choice. I was brought here when they found me in Forest with my eyes gone.”

“Well, I did it. Many have.”

“Yes. That’s true. But I hope it won’t be hard for her.”

Matty glanced over. “Don’t put those beets in. I hate beets.”

“They’re good for you.”

“Not if they’re thrown on the ground. And that’s what they’ll be if you put them in.”

The blind man chuckled and dropped the beets into the sink. “Well,” he said, “they’re heavy anyway. They’d weigh you down. But I’m putting carrots in.”

“Anything but beets.”

There was a knock on the door, and it was Jean, her hair curlier than usual from the dampness that remained after the rain. “Are you still going, Matty, in this weather?”

Matty laughed at her concern. “I’ve gone through Forest in snow,” he boasted. “This weather is nothing. Yes, I’m about to leave. I’m just packing food.”

“I’ve brought you some bread,” she said, and took the wrapped loaf from the basket she carried. He noticed that she had decorated it with a leafy sprig and a yellow chrysanthemum blossom.

Matty took the loaf and thanked her, though secretly he wondered how he would ever fit it in. Finally the blind man found a way to tuck it inside the rolled blanket.

“I want to stop on my way out of Village and see Ramon,” Matty said. “I’d better hurry or I’ll never get started.”

“Oh, Matty,” Jean said. “You don’t know? Ramon’s very sick. His sister, too. They’ve put a sign on the door to their house. No one can enter.”

Troubling though the news was, Matty was not surprised. Ramon had been coughing, feverish-looking, and increasingly unwell for days now. “What does Herbalist say?”

“That’s why they put the sign up. Herbalist is afraid it may be contagious. That an epidemic could come.”

What was happening to Village? Matty felt a terrible unease. There had never been an epidemic here. He remembered the place he had come from, where many had died, from time to time, and all of their belongings had been burned, after, in hopes of destroying the illnesses carried by filth or fleas or, some thought, sorcery. But it had never happened here. People had always been so careful here, so clean.

He could see that the blind man’s face had taken on a worried look, too, at the news.

For a moment, Matty stood there thinking while Seer arranged his pack on his back and attached the rolled blanket below it. He thought of the frog first, then the puppy, and wondered if his gift could save his friend. He could go to Ramon’s house now, and place his hands upon the feverish body. He knew it would be indescribably hard, would take all of his strength, but he thought there might be a chance.

But what then? If he himself survived such an attempt, he would be desperately weakened, he knew, and would have to recover. He could not

possibly make the journey through Forest if he first weakened himself on Ramon's behalf. Forest was already thickening, he knew, whatever that meant. It would soon become impassable. The blind man's daughter would be lost to them forever.

And, most important, Leader had told him to save his gift. *Don't spend it,* Leader had said.

So Matty decided with regret that he would have to leave Ramon to his illness.

"Look," Jean said suddenly. "Look at this. It's *different*."

Matty glanced over and saw that she was standing in front of the tapestry Kira had made for her father. Even from where he stood, he could see what Jean meant. The entire forest area, the hundreds of tiny stitches in shades of green, had darkened, and the threads had knotted and twisted in odd ways. The peaceful scene had changed into something no longer beautiful. It had an ominous feel to it, a feel of impenetrability.

He went near to it and stared at it, puzzled and alarmed.

"What is it, Matty?" Jean asked.

"Nothing. It's all right." He indicated with his eyes that she should not speak aloud of the odd change in the tapestry. Matty did not want Seer to know.

It was time to go.

He wriggled his shoulders to adjust the pack comfortably on his back, and leaned forward to hug the blind man, who murmured to him, "Be safe."

To his surprise, Jean kissed him. So often in the past, teasing, she had said she would, one day. Now she did, and it was a quick and fragrant touch to his lips that gave him courage and, even before he started out, made him yearn to come back home.

Twelve

FROLIC WAS AFRAID of the dark. Matty had never noticed it before, because always they had been indoors, with the oil lamp glowing, at night. He laughed a little to hear the puppy whimper in fear when night fell and Forest turned black. He picked him up and murmured words of reassurance but could feel the dog's body tremble, still, in his arms.

Well, thought Matty, it was time to sleep, anyway. He was quite near the clearing where the frog had been and perhaps still was. Carefully he made his way across the soft moss, holding Frolic against his chest and feeling the way with his feet. Then he knelt in the gnarled root bed of a tall tree and removed his pack. He unrolled the blanket, fed Frolic a few pieces torn from the loaf of bread, nibbled at it himself, and then curled up with his puppy and drifted off.

Churrump.

Churrump.

Frolic raised his head. His nose twitched and he flicked his ears curiously at the sound. But then he buried his head again under the curve of Matty's arm. Soon he too slept.

The days of the journey passed, and after the fourth night, the food was gone. But Matty was strong and unafraid, and to his surprise, little Frolic did not need to be carried. The puppy followed him and sat watching patiently as he posted the messages along divergent paths. Doing so lengthened the journey considerably. If he had gone straight through, he would be approaching Kira's village, his own home in the past, quite soon. But he reminded himself that being a messenger was his most important task, and so he took the side paths, walked great distances, and left the message of Village's closure at each place where new ones coming could be advised to turn back.

The scarred woman and her group had come from the east, he knew. There was a look that identified the easterners. He could see, on the path to the east, remaining bits of evidence that they had come through not long before: crushed underbrush where they had huddled to sleep, chunks of

charcoal where a fire had been, a pink ribbon that had fallen, Matty thought, from a child's hair. He picked it up and put it in his backpack.

He wondered if the woman had left her son behind and returned alone to her other children by now. There was no sign of her.

The weather remained clear and he was grateful for that, because although he had bragged about past journeys through snow, in truth it was very hard to fight the elements, and almost impossible to find food in bad weather. Now there were early-fall berries and many nuts; he laughed at the chattering squirrels who were storing their own provisions, and with little guilt robbed a nest he found that was half filled with winter fare.

He knew places to fish, and the best way to catch them. Frolic turned up his nose at fish, even after Matty had grilled one on his small fire.

"Go hungry, then," Matty told him, laughing, and finished the browned, glistening fish himself. Then, as he watched, Frolic cocked his ears, listening, and dashed off. Matty heard a squawk, then a flurry of wings and rustling leaves and growls. After a bit, Frolic returned, looking satisfied, and with a bit of feather stuck to his whiskers.

"So? I had fish, you had bird." It amused Matty to talk to Frolic as if he were human. Since his other puppy had died, he had always traveled the paths alone. Now it was a treat to have company, and sometimes he felt that Frolic understood every word he said.

Although it was a subtle change, he understood what Leader had meant when he said that Forest was thickening. Matty knew Forest so well that he could anticipate changes that came with the seasons. Ordinarily, at summer's end, as now, some leaves would be falling, and by the time snow came, later, many trees would be bare. In the heart of winter, he needed to find water at the places where streams rushed quickly and didn't freeze; many of the quiet pools he knew well would be coated with ice. In spring there would be irritating insects to brush from his face, but there would be fresh, sweet berries then, too.

Always, though, it was familiar.

But on this journey, something was different. For the first time, Matty felt hostility from Forest. The fish were slow to come to his hook. A chipmunk, usually an amiable companion, chittered angrily and bit his finger when he held his hand toward it. Many red berries, of a kind he had always eaten, had black spots on them and tasted bitter; and for the first

time he noticed poison ivy growing across the path again and again, where it had never grown before.

It was darker, too. The trees seemed to have moved at their tops, leaning toward each other to create a roof across the path; they would protect him from rain, he realized, and perhaps that was a good thing. But they didn't seem benevolent. They created darkness in the middle of day, and shadows that distorted the path and made him stumble from time to time on roots and rocks.

And it smelled bad. There was a stench to Forest now, as if it concealed dead, decaying things in the new thick darkness.

Camping in a clearing that he knew well from previous journeys, Matty sat on a log that he had often used as a seat while he cooked his meal. Suddenly it crumbled under him, and he had to pick himself up and brush rotting bark and slimy, foul-smelling material from his clothing. The piece of log that had been there so long, sturdy and useful, had simply fallen into chunks of dead vegetative matter; never again would it provide Matty a place to rest. He kicked it away and watched countless dislodged beetles scurry to new hiding places.

He began to have trouble sleeping. Nightmares tormented him. His head ached suddenly, and his throat was sore.

But he was not far, now, from his destination. So he trudged on. To divert himself from the discomfort that Forest had become, he thought about himself as a little boy. He remembered his earliest days when he had called himself the Fiercest of the Fierce, and his friendship then with the girl named Kira who was the blind man's daughter.

Thirteen

SUCH A SWAGGERING, brash little boy he had been! With no father, and only an impoverished, embittered mother to try to make a life for children she had not wanted and did not love, Matty had turned to a life of small crimes and spirited mischief. Most of his time had been spent with a ragtag band of dirty-faced boys who carried out whatever schemes they could to survive. The harshness of his homeplace led him to thievery and deceit; had he been grown, he would have been imprisoned or worse.

But there had always been a gentle side to Matty, even when he had disguised it. He had loved his dog, a mongrel he had found injured and had nursed back to health. And he had come, eventually, to love the crippled girl called Kira, who had never known her father, and whose mother had died suddenly and left her alone.

"Mascot," Kira had called him, laughing. "Sidekick." She had made him wash, taught him manners, and told him stories.

"I be the Fiercest of the Fierce!" he had bragged to her once.

"You are the dirtiest of the dirty faces," she had said, laughing, in reply, and given him the first bath he ever had. He had struggled and protested, but in truth had loved the feel of warm water. He had never learned to love soap, though Kira gave him some for his own. But he felt the years of grime slip from him and knew that he could turn into someone cleaner, better.

Roaming as he always had, Matty had learned the intricate paths of Forest. One day he had found his way to Village for the first time, and had met the blind man there.

"She lives?" the blind man had asked him, unbelieving. "My daughter is alive?"

It was very dangerous for the blind man to return. Those who had tried to kill him, who had left him for dead years before, thought they had succeeded. They would have slain him instantly had he found his way back. But Matty, a master of stealth, had brought him secretly, at night, to meet his daughter for the first time. He watched from a corner of the room as Kira recognized the broken stone that Seer wore as an amulet, and matched it to her own, fitting it to the fragment given to her by her dying

mother. Matty saw the blind man touch his daughter's face, to learn her, and he watched in silence as they mourned Kira's mother together, their hearts connected by the loss.

Then, when darkness came the next night, he had led the blind man back again. But Kira would not come. Not then.

"Someday," she had told Matty and her father when they begged her to return with them to Village. "I'll come someday. There's time still. And I have things to do here first."

"I suppose there's a young man," the blind man had said to Matty as they traveled back without her. "She's the age for it."

"Nah," Matty had said scornfully. "Not Kira. She has better stuff on her mind.

"Anyways," he had added, referring to her twisted leg, "she has that horrid gimp. No one can marry iffen they got a gimp. She's lucky they didn't feed her to the beasts. They wanted to. They only kept her 'cause she could do things they needed."

"What things?"

"She grows flowers, and—"

"Her mother did, too."

"Yes, her mum taught her, and to make the colors from them."

"Dyes?"

"Yes, she dyes the threads and then she makes pictures from them. No one else can do it. She has like a magic touch, they say. And they want her for that."

"She would be honored in Village. Not only for her talent but for her twisted leg."

"Turn here." Matty took the blind man's arm and guided him to the right side of a turning in the path. "Watch the roots there." He noticed that a root lifted itself and stabbed slightly at the man's sandaled foot. It made him very nervous, guiding on this return trip, because he could feel, being familiar with it, that Forest was giving small Warnings to the blind man. He would not be allowed to come through again.

"She'll come when she's ready," he reassured Kira's father. "And till then, I'll go back and forth between."

But it had been two years since he had last seen Kira.

Matty emerged from Forest with a stumble, blinking at the sudden sunshine, for he had been in the dim thickness of trees for many days now and felt that he had almost forgotten light.

He fell on the path and sat there panting, slightly dizzy, with Frolic pawing worriedly at his leg. In the past he had always—what would the word be? *strolled*—from Forest, sometimes whistling. But this was different. He felt that he had been expelled. Chewed up and spat out. When he looked back toward the trees, in the direction he had come, it seemed inhospitable, unwelcoming, locked down.

He knew he would have to reenter Forest and return by those same dark paths that now seemed so ominous. He would have to lead Kira through, to the safety of her future with her father. And he knew suddenly that it would be his last journey in that place.

There was not much time left, and he would not be able to linger here, to look up his boyhood pals, to reminisce with them about their pranks, or to brag a little about his status now. He usually did that when he came. He would not even have time to say good-bye to the stranger his brother had become.

Village would close in three weeks from the time of the proclamation. Matty had calculated very carefully. He had counted the days of his journey, adding in the extra days it took for his side trips to tack the messages in place. Now he had just enough time to rest, which he badly needed to do, collect food for the return journey, and persuade Kira to come with him. If they moved steadily and without interruption through Forest (though he knew it would be slower with the girl, who had to lean on her stick) they would arrive in time.

Matty blinked, took a deep breath, got to his feet, and hurried on to the small cottage around the next turning, the place where Kira lived.

The gardens were larger than he remembered; since his last visit almost two years before, she had expanded them, he saw. Thick clumps of yellow and deep pink flowers fringed the edge of the small dwelling with its hand-hewn beams and thatched roof. Matty had never paid attention to the names of flowers—boys generally disdained such things—but now he wished he knew them, so that he could tell Jean.

Frolic went to the base of a wooden post that was entwined with a purple-blossomed vine, and lifted his leg to proclaim his presence and

authority here.

The door to the cottage opened and Kira appeared there. She was wearing a blue dress and her long dark hair was tied back with a matching ribbon.

“Matty!” she cried in delight.

He grinned at her.

“And you’ve got yourself a new pup! I hoped you would. You were so sad, I remember, after Branchie died.”

“His name is Frolic, and I’m afraid he’s watering your . . .”

“Clematis. It’s all right,” she said, laughing. She reached for Matty and embraced him. Ordinarily uncomfortable with hugs, he would have stiffened his shoulders and drawn back; but now, from exhaustion and affection, he held Kira and to his own amazement felt his eyes fill with tears. He blinked them back.

“All right, stand back now and let me see you,” she said. “Are you taller yet than I am?”

He stood back grinning and saw that they were eye to eye.

“Soon you will be. And your voice is almost a man’s.”

“I can read Shakespeare,” he told her, swaggering.

“Hah! So can I!” she said, and he knew then for certain how changed this village was, for in the earlier days, girls had not been allowed to learn.

“Oh, Matty, I remember when you were such a tiny thing, and so wild!”

“The Fiercest of the Fierce!” he reminded her, and she smiled fondly at him.

“You must be very tired. And hungry! You’ve just made such a long journey. Come inside. I have soup on the fire. And I want news of my father.”

He followed her into the familiar cottage and waited while she reached for her walking stick that leaned against a wall and arranged it under her right arm. Dragging the useless leg, she took a thick earthen bowl from a shelf and went to the fire where a large pot simmered and smelled of herbs and vegetables.

Matty looked around. No wonder she had not wanted to leave this place. From the sturdy ceiling beams dangled the countless dried herbs and plants from which she made her dyes. Shelves on the wall were bright with rolls of yarn and thread arranged by color, white and palest yellow at one end, gradually deepening into blues and purples and then browns and grays

at the other. On a threaded loom in the corner between two windows, a half-finished weaving pictured an intricate landscape of mountains, and he could see that she was now working on the sky and had woven in some feathery clouds of pink-tinged white.

She set the bowl of steaming soup on the table in front of Matty and then went to the sink to pump water into a bowl for Frolic.

"Now. Tell me of Father," she asked. "He's well?"

"He's fine. He sends you his love."

He watched as Kira leaned her stick against the sink and knelt with difficulty to place the bowl on the floor. Then she called to Frolic, who was industriously chewing a broom in the corner.

When the puppy had come to her and turned his attention to the bowl of water, Kira rose again, sliced a thick piece from a loaf of bread, wedged her stick under her shoulder again, and brought the bread to the table. Matty watched the way she walked, the way she had always walked. Her right foot twisted inward, pulling the entire leg with it. The leg had not grown as the other had. It was shorter, turned, and useless.

He thanked her and dipped one end of the slice into his soup.

"He's a sweet puppy, Matty." He half listened as she chattered cheerfully about the dog. His thoughts had turned to Frolic's birth and how close to death the pup and his mother had been.

He glanced down at her twisted leg. How much more easily she would be able to walk—how much more steadily and quickly she would be able to travel—if the leg were straight, if the foot could be planted firmly on the ground.

He remembered the afternoon after the puppy and his mother had been saved. Today he was tired, very tired, from the long journey through Forest. But on that day, he had felt near death.

He tried to recall how long it had taken him to recover. He had slept, he knew. Yes. He remembered that he had slept for the afternoon, glad that the blind man had not been at home to ask why. But he had arisen before dinner—weary, still, but able to hide it, to eat and talk as if nothing had happened.

So his recovery had taken only a few hours, really. Still, it had been a puppy. Well, a puppy and its mother. *Two dogs*. He had fixed—cured? saved?—two dogs in late morning, and recovered from it by the end of the day.

“Matty? You’re not listening! You’re half asleep!” Kira’s laughter was warm and sympathetic.

“I’m sorry.” He put the last bit of bread into his mouth and looked apologetically at her.

“You’re both tired. Look at Frolic.”

He glanced over and saw the puppy sound asleep, curled into a mound of undyed yarn heaped near the door, as if the soft pile were a mother to doze against.

“I have work to do in the garden, Matty. The coreopsis needs staking and I’ve not had a chance to get to it. You lie down and get some rest, now, while I’m outside. Later we can talk. And you can go into the village and find your friends, for a visit.”

He nodded and went to the couch to lie down on top of the knitted blanket that she had thrown across it. In his mind, he was counting the days they had left. He would explain to her that there was no time to visit with old pals.

He watched, his eyes heavy with exhaustion, as she took his bowl to the sink, placed it there, and then, leaning on her stick, gathered some stakes from a shelf, and a ball of twine. With her garden tools she turned to go outdoors. The twisted foot dragged in its familiar way. He had known everything about Kira for so long: her smile, her voice, her merry optimism, the amazing strength and skill of her hands, and the burden of her useless leg.

I must tell you this, Matty thought before he slept. *I can fix you.*

Fourteen

TO HIS AMAZEMENT, Kira said no. Not no to leaving—he hadn't suggested that to her, not yet—but a definite, unarguable no to the idea of a straightened, whole leg.

"This is who I am, Matty," she said. "It is who I have always been."

She looked at him fondly. But her voice was firm. It was evening. The fire glowed in the fireplace and she had lit the oil lamps. Matty wished that the blind man were in the room with them, playing his instrument, because the soft, intricate chords always brought a peace to their evenings together and he wanted Kira to hear the music, to feel the comfort it brought.

He had not yet told her that she was to return with him. During their supper together, as Kira chattered about the changes in the old village, how much better things were now, he had only half listened. In his mind he had been weighing what to tell her and when and how. There was so little time; and he needed, Matty knew, to present it to her in a decisive and convincing way.

But suddenly he heard her make a casual comment about her handicap. She was describing a small tapestry she had embroidered as a wedding gift for her friend Thomas, the woodcarver, who had recently been married.

"It was all finished and rolled up, and I decorated it with flowers," she said, "and on the morning of the wedding I set out, carrying it. But it had rained, and the path was wet, and I slipped and dropped the tapestry right into a mud puddle!" Kira laughed. "Luckily it was still early, so I came back here and was able to clean it. No one ever knew.

"My leg and stick are a nuisance when it's wet outdoors," she said. "My stick has never learned to navigate mud." She reached over to the pot and began to pour more tea into their mugs.

Surprising himself, he blurted it out. "I can fix your leg."

The room fell completely silent except for the hiss and crackle of the fire. Kira stared at Matty.

"I *can*," he said after a moment. "I have a gift. Your father says that you do, too, so you'll understand."

“I do,” Kira agreed. “I always have. But my gift doesn’t fix twisted things.”

“I know. Your father told me yours is different.”

Kira looked down at her hands, wrapped around her mug of tea. She opened her fingers, spread her hands upon the table, and turned them over. Matty could see the slender palms and the strong fingers, calloused at their tips from the garden work, the loom, and the needles that she used for her complicated, beautiful tapestries. “Mine is in my hands,” she said softly. “It happens when I make things. My hands . . .”

He knew he shouldn’t interrupt. But time was so short. So he cut her off, and apologized for it. “Kira, I want you to tell me all about your gift. But later. Right now there are important things to do and decide.

“I’m going to show you something,” he told her. “Watch this. My gift is in my hands, too.”

He had not planned this. But it seemed necessary. On the table lay the sharp knife with which she had sliced bread for their supper. Matty picked it up. He leaned down, and pulled the left leg of his trousers up. Kira watched, her eyes confused. Quickly, without flinching, he punctured his own knee. Dark red blood trickled in a thin crooked line down his lower leg.

“Oh!” Kira gasped. She stared at him and held her hand to her mouth. “What . . . ?”

Matty swallowed, took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and placed both of his hands on his wounded knee. He felt it coming. He felt his veins begin to pulsate; then the vibration coursed through him, and he felt the power leave his hands and enter his wound. It lasted no more than a few seconds and ended.

He blinked, and took his hands away. They were smeared slightly with blood. The trickled line on his leg had already begun to dry there.

“Matty! Whatever are you . . . ?” When he gestured, Kira leaned forward and looked carefully at his knee. After a moment she reached for the woven napkin on the table, dipped it into her tea, and wiped his leg with the damp cloth. The line of blood disappeared. His knee was smooth, unblemished. There was no wound at all. She looked intently at it, then bit her lip, reached out, and pulled the hem of his trouser leg down over his knee.

“I see.” It was all she said.

Matty shook himself free of the wave of fatigue it had caused. “It was a very small wound,” he explained. “I just did it to show you I could. It didn’t take much out of me. But I’ve done it with bigger things, Kira. With other creatures. With much larger wounds.”

“Humans?”

“Not yet. But I can do it. I can feel it, Kira. With a gift, you *know*.”

She nodded. “Yes. That’s true.” She glanced at her own hands, resting there on the table, still holding the damp cloth.

“Kira, your leg will take a great deal out of me. I’ll have to sleep, after, maybe for a whole day or even longer. And I don’t have much time.”

She looked at him quizzically. “Time for what?”

“I’ll explain. But for now, I think we should start. If I do it right away, I can sleep completely through the night and almost all of the morning. You can use that time to become accustomed to being whole . . .”

“I *am* whole,” she said defiantly.

“I meant to having two strong legs. You’ll be amazed at how it feels, at how much more easily you can move around. But it will take a little while to adjust to it.”

She stared at him. She looked down at her twisted leg.

“Why don’t you lie down over there on the couch? I’ll pull this chair over and sit beside you.” Matty began kneading his hands in preparation. He took several deep breaths and felt energized. He could tell that his full strength was back. The knee wound had been such a small thing, really.

He rose, lifted his wooden chair, and moved it over beside the couch where he had napped that afternoon. He arranged the cushions so that she would be comfortable. Behind him he heard Kira rise from her chair as well, lift her stick from where it leaned against the table, and walk across the room. To his surprise, when he turned, he saw that she had taken the mugs to the sink and was beginning to wash them, as if it were an ordinary evening.

“Kira?”

She looked over at him. She frowned slightly. Then she said no.

There was no arguing with her, none at all. After a while Matty gave up the attempt.

Finally he moved his chair again so that he could sit in front of the fire. It was chilly in the evenings now, with summer ending. Forest had been downright cold at night, and he had woken in the mornings during his

journey aching and chilled. It was comforting to sit here by the warm fire now.

Kira picked up a small wooden frame with a half-finished piece of embroidery stretched taut across it. She brought it to her chair, and moved a basket filled with bright threads to the floor beside her. Then she leaned her stick against the fireplace wall, sat down, and picked up the needle that was waiting, threaded with green, attached to the fabric.

"I will go with you," she said quite suddenly in her soft voice. "But I will go as I am. With my leg. With my stick."

Matty, puzzled, stared at her. How had she known, before he asked it, what he was planning to ask of her?

"I was going to explain," he said after a long moment. "I was going to persuade you. How . . . ?"

"I started to tell you earlier," she said, "about my gift. What my hands do. Move your chair closer and I'll show you now."

He did so, pulling the crude wooden chair near to where she was. She tilted the embroidery frame so that he could see. Like the colorful tapestry on the wall of the blind man's house, this was a landscape. The stitches were tiny and complicated, and each section a subtle variation in color, so that deep green moved gradually into a slightly lighter shade, and then again lighter, until at the edges it was a pale yellow. The colors combined to form an exquisite pattern of trees, with the tiniest of individual leaves outlined in countless numbers.

"It's Forest," Matty said, recognizing it.

Kira nodded. "Look beyond it," she said, and extended her finger to point to a section in the upper right, where Forest opened and tiny houses were patterned around curved paths.

He thought he could almost make out the house he shared with the blind man, though it was infinitely small on the fabric.

"Village," he said, examining with awe the meticulousness of her craft.

"I embroider this scene again and again," Kira said, "and sometimes—not always—my hands begin to move in ways I don't understand. The threads seem to take on a power of their own."

He leaned closer to look more carefully at the embroidery. It was astounding, the detail of it, how tiny it was.

"Matty?" she said. "I've never done this with anyone watching. But I can feel it in my hands right now. Watch."

He peered intently as her right hand picked up the needle threaded with green. She inserted it into the fabric at an unfinished place near the edge of Forest. Suddenly both of her hands began to vibrate slightly. They *shimmered.* He had seen this once before, on the day that Leader stood at the window, gathered himself, and saw beyond.

He looked up at her face and saw that her eyes were closed. But her hands were moving very quickly now. They reached into the basket again and again, changed threads in a motion so fast he could barely follow it, and the needle entered the cloth, and entered the cloth, and entered the cloth.

Time seemed to stop. The fire continued to crackle and sputter. Frolic sighed in his sleep at the edge of the hearth. Matty sat speechless, watching the shimmering hands dart; hours and days and weeks seemed to go by, yet oddly, only a blink, an instant, of time passed. Today and tomorrow and yesterday were all spun together and held in those hands that moved and moved and moved, yet her eyes were closed, and the fire still flickered and the dog still slept.

Then it ended.

Kira opened her eyes, sat up straighter, and stretched her shoulders. “It tires me,” she explained, though he already knew it.

“Look now,” she said. “Quickly, because it will fade.”

He leaned forward and saw that now, in the embroidered scene, at the bottom, two tiny people were entering Forest. He recognized one as himself, backpack on his back; he could even see, amazingly, the torn place on the sleeve of his jacket. Behind him, meticulously stitched in shades of brown, was Frolic, his tail high. And beside Frolic he saw Kira, her blue dress, her stick wedged under her arm, her dark hair tied back.

The top edge of the embroidery had changed as well. Now, beside the house he had recognized as his, he could see the blind man standing. His posture was that of someone waiting for something.

And suddenly Matty could see, too, crowds of people at the edge of Village. They were dragging huge logs. Someone—it looked like Mentor—was giving directions. They were preparing to build a wall.

Matty sat back. He blinked, astounded, then leaned forward to look at it again. He realized he wanted to search the scene for a glimpse of Jean. But now the details were gone. He could still see the colored stitches, but it was a simple—exquisitely beautiful, but simple—landscape again. For a

moment he saw the people, flat now, with no detail, but then they faded abruptly and were gone.

Kira set the embroidery frame down on the floor and rose from her chair. “We must leave in the morning,” she said. “I’ll prepare food.”

Matty was still stunned by what he had just seen. “I don’t understand,” he said.

“Do you understand what happened when you stabbed your knee with that knife and then closed and cured the wound with your hands?”

“No,” he admitted. “I don’t. It’s my gift. That’s all.”

“Well,” Kira said matter-of-factly, “this is mine. My hands create a picture of the future. Yesterday morning I held that same fabric and saw you come out of Forest. In the afternoon I opened the door and there you were.”

She chuckled. “I hadn’t seen Frolic, though. He was a nice surprise.” The dog awoke and looked up at the sound of his name. He came to her to be patted.

“While you napped,” she went on, “I stitched again and saw Father waiting for me. That was just this afternoon. Now they have started to move the logs into place for the wall. And—did you notice the change in Forest, Matty?”

He shook his head. “I was looking at the people.”

“Forest is thickening. So we must hurry, Matty.”

Odd. It was the same thing that Leader had seen. “Kira?” Matty asked.

“Yes?” She was taking food from a cupboard.

“Did you see a young man with blue eyes? About your age? We call him Leader.”

She stood still for a moment, thinking. A strand of dark hair fell across her face, and she brushed it back with her hand. Then she shook her head. “No,” she said. “But I *felt* him.”

Fifteen

THEY WOKE EARLY. The sun was just rising, and through the window Matty could see that the gardens were bathed in amber light. Thick around a tall trellis, a vine that had been simply green when he arrived the day before was now profuse with opened blue and white morning glories. Beyond the trellis, on tall stalks, tiny aster blossoms, deep pink with golden centers, trembled in the dawn breeze.

He felt her presence, suddenly, and turned to see Kira standing behind him, looking out.

"It will be hard for you to leave this," he said.

But she smiled and shook her head. "It's time. I always knew the time would come. I told my father that long ago."

"He says you'll have a garden there. He wanted me to tell you that."

She nodded. "Eat quickly, Matty, and we'll go. I've fed Frolic already."

"Do you need help?" Matty asked, his mouth full of the sweet muffin she had given him, as he watched her arrange a wrapped bundle on her back, crisscrossing the straps that held it around her chest. "What's in it?"

"No, I can do it just fine. It's my frame and some needles and thread."

"Kira, the journey's hard and long. There won't be time to sit and sew." Then Matty fell quiet. Of course she needed this. It was the way her gift came.

She had put food inside Matty's pack as well as in his rolled blanket. It was heavier than it had been coming, for there were two of them now. But Matty felt strong. He was almost relieved that she had not allowed him to mend her leg, for it would have weakened him badly, cost them perhaps several days as he rested from it, and sent them out less prepared and more vulnerable.

He could see, too, that she was accustomed to her stick and twisted leg. A lifetime of walking in that way had made it, as she had pointed out, part of her. It was who she was. To become a fast-striding Kira with two straight legs would have been to become a different person. This was not a journey Matty could undertake with a stranger.

“Frolic, if you were a little bigger and less frisky, I would strap a pack to your back,” Kira said, laughing, to the eager puppy, who stood beside the door with his tail churning in the air. He could tell they were leaving. He was not going to be left behind.

Soon they were loaded with everything they had packed so carefully the night before.

“We’re ready, then,” Kira announced, and Matty nodded in agreement. From the open doorway, with Frolic already outside sniffing the earth, they looked back to the large room that had been Kira’s home since she had been a young girl. She was leaving the loom, the baskets of yarn and thread, the dried herbs on the rafters, the wall-hangings, the earthen mugs and plates made for her by the village potter, and a handsome wooden tray that had been a gift long ago from her friend Thomas, who had carved it with interwined, complicated designs. From hooks along the wall hung her clothes, things she had made, some of them skirts and jackets rich with embroidered and appliqued designs. Today she was wearing her simple blue dress and a heavy knitted sweater with buttons made from small flat stones.

She closed the door on all of it. “Come, Frolic,” Matty called, unnecessarily. The dog scampered to them and raised his leg one last time against the doorsill, saying, in his way, “I have been here.”

Then Matty moved toward the place where the path entered Forest. Kira, leaning on her stick, followed him, and Frolic, ears up, came behind.

“You know,” Kira said, “I’ve walked the forest path between this cottage and the center of my village so many times.” Then she laughed. “Well, of course you know that, Matty. You did it with me when you were a little boy.”

“I did. Again and again.”

“But I have never once entered Forest. There was no need, of course. And it always seemed frightening somehow.”

They had barely entered, and behind them the light of the clearing still showed, and a corner of Kira’s little house. But ahead, Matty could see, the path was oddly dark. He didn’t remember it being so dark.

“Are you frightened now?” he asked her.

“Oh, no, not with you. You know Forest so well.”

“That’s true. I do.” It *was* true, but even as he said it, Matty felt a sense of discomfort, though he hid it from Kira. The path ahead did not seem to be as familiar as it had always been. He could tell that it was the same path—the turnings were the same; as he led her around the next one, the clearing behind them was no longer visible—but things that had seemed easy and accustomed no longer did. Now everything felt a little different: slightly darker, and decidedly hostile.

But he said nothing. He led the way, and Kira, strong despite her handicap, trudged after him.

“They have entered.”

Leader turned from the window. He had stood there for a long moment, intent, focused, while beside him the blind man waited. They had been doing this for several days.

Leader sat to rest. He breathed hard. He was accustomed to this, the way his body temporarily lost its vigor and needed to restore itself after he had looked beyond.

The blind man gave a sigh that was clearly one of relief. “So she came with him.”

Leader nodded, still not ready to talk.

“I worried that she wouldn’t. It meant leaving so much behind. But Matty convinced her. Good for him.”

Leader stretched, and sipped from the glass of water on his desk. Then he was able to speak. “She didn’t need convincing. She could tell that it was time. She has that gift.”

The blind man went to the window and stood there listening. Heavy dragging sounds and thuds were accompanied by shouts:

“Over here!”

“Put it down there!”

“Watch out!”

They could hear Mentor’s voice, loud above the others. “Stack them right there,” he directed. “Five to a stack. You! You idiot! Stop that! If you aren’t going to help, go someplace else!”

Leader winced. “It was such a short time ago that he was so patient and soft-spoken. Listen to him now.”

“Tell me how he looks,” the blind man said.

Leader went to the window and looked down at the place where they were preparing to build the wall. He found Mentor in the crowd. “His bald spot is completely gone,” he said. “He’s taller. Or at least stands straighter. He’s lost weight. And his chin is firmer than it was.”

“A strange trade for him to have made,” the blind man commented.

Leader shrugged. “For a woman,” he pointed out. “People do strange things.”

“I suppose it’s too soon for you to look beyond again.” The blind man was still at the window. His posture was uneasy.

Leader smiled. “You know it is. They’ve only just entered. They’re fine.”

“How much time do they have?”

“Ten days. The wall can’t go up for ten days, according to the edict. It’s enough time.”

“Matty’s like a son to me. It’s as if both my children are out there.”

“I know.” Leader put a reassuring arm across the blind man’s shoulders. “Come back here tomorrow morning and we’ll look again.”

“I’ll go work in my garden. I’m preparing flower beds for Kira.”

“Good idea. It’ll take your mind from the worry.”

But when Seer had gone, Leader stood at the window for a while, listening to the wall builders at their preparations. He was very worried himself. He had not told the blind man. But while he had watched Matty, Kira, and the puppy enter Forest, he had been able to see, too, that Forest was shifting, moving, thickening, and preparing to destroy them.

Sixteen

"I'LL CATCH FISH farther along," Matty said. "Frolic won't eat it, but you and I can. And there are berries and nuts. So we don't have to save this. Eat all you want."

Kira nodded and took a bite from the deep red apple he had given her. "It will be good to reduce the weight in your pack," she pointed out. "We can move more quickly then."

They were seated on the blanket in the place Matty had chosen to spend the first night. They had covered quite a distance during the day. He was surprised at how well she was able to keep up the pace.

"No, Frolic, not my stick." Kira scolded the little dog affectionately when he tried to use her cane as a plaything to chew. "Here," she said to him, and picked up a stick from the ground. She threw it to him and he dashed away with it, growling playfully, hoping that someone would chase him. When no one did, he lay down and attacked the stick like a warrior, tearing its bark with his small sharp teeth.

Matty tossed some dead twigs onto the fire he had built. It was close to dark now, and chilly. "We walked a long way today," he told Kira. "I'm amazed at how well you manage. I thought that because of your leg . . ."

"I'm so accustomed to it. I've always walked like this." Kira untied her leather sandals and began to rub her feet. "I'm tired, though. And look. I'm bleeding." She leaned forward with the hem of her skirt bunched in her hand, and wiped blood from the sole of her foot. "I'll throw this dress away when we arrive." She laughed. "Will there be fabric there so that I can make new clothes?"

Matty nodded. "Yes. There's plenty in the marketplace. And you can borrow clothes, too, from my friend Jean. She's about your size."

Kira looked at him. "Jean?" she said. "You've not mentioned her before."

He grinned and was glad it was dark so she wouldn't see his face turning crimson. It startled him that he had blushed. What was happening? He had known Jean for years. They had played together as children after his arrival in Village. He had tried, once, to tease and frighten her with a snake, only to discover that she loved garden snakes.

To Kira, now, he just shrugged. “She’s my friend.

“She’s pretty,” he added, then cringed, embarrassed that he had said that, and waited for Kira to tease him. But she wasn’t really listening. She was examining her feet, and he could see, even in the flickering light of the fire, that the soles were badly cut and bleeding.

She dipped the hem of her dress into the bowl of water they had set out for Frolic, and wiped the wounds. Watching her in the firelight, Matty could see her wince.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

“It will be all right. I’ve brought some herbal salve and I’ll rub it in.” He watched as she opened a pouch she took from her pocket and began to treat the punctures and cuts.

“Is there something wrong with your shoes?” he asked, glancing at the soft leather sandals set side by side on the ground. They had firm soles and she had seemed to walk comfortably in them.

“No. My shoes are fine. It’s strange, though. While we were walking, I kept having to stop to pull twigs out of my shoes. You probably noticed.” She laughed. “It was as if the underbrush was actually *reaching in* to poke at me.”

She rubbed a little more ointment into the wounds on her feet. “It poked me *hard,* too. Maybe tomorrow I’ll wrap some cloth around my feet before I put my sandals back on.”

“Good idea.” Matty didn’t let her see how uneasy this made him feel. He fed the fire again and then arranged some rocks around it so that it couldn’t escape from the little cleared space where he had built it. “We should sleep now, and get an early start tomorrow.”

Soon, curled on the ground beside her, with Frolic between them and the blanket thrown across all three, Matty listened. He heard Kira’s even breathing; she had fallen asleep immediately. He felt Frolic stir and turn in his light puppyish slumber, probably dreaming of birds and chipmunks to chase. He heard the last shifting of the sticks in the fire as it died and turned to ash. He heard the whoosh and flutter of an owl as it dived, and then the tiny squeal of a doomed rodent caught in its talons.

From the direction toward which they were traveling, he perceived a hint of the stench that permeated the deep center of Forest. By Matty’s calculations, they would not reach the center for three days. He was surprised that already the foul smell of decay drifted to where they were

resting. When finally he slept, his dreams were layered over with an awareness of rot and the imminence of terrible danger.

In the morning, after they had eaten, Kira wrapped both of her feet in fabric torn from her petticoat, and when the wrappings were thick and protective, she loosened the straps of her sandals and fit her bandaged feet carefully into them.

Then she picked up her stick and walked a bit around the fire to test the arrangement. “Good,” she said after a moment. “It’s quite comfortable. I won’t have a problem.”

Matty, rolling the blanket around the remains of their food, glanced over. “Tell me if it happens again, the sticks and twigs poking at you.”

She nodded. “Ready, Frolic?” she called, and the puppy scampered to her from the bushes where he had been pawing at a rodent’s hole. Kira adjusted her wrapped bundle of embroidery tools on her back and prepared to follow Matty as he set off.

To his surprise, he had some difficulty finding the path this second morning. That had never happened before. Kira waited patiently behind him as he investigated several apparent entrances from the clearing where they had slept.

“I’ve come through here so often,” he told her, puzzled. “I’ve slept in this same place so many times before. And I’ve always kept the path clear and easy to find. But now . . .”

He pushed back some bushes with his hand, stared for a moment at the ground he had revealed, then took his knife from his pocket and pruned back the branches. “Here,” he said, pointing. “Here’s the path. But the bushes have somehow grown across and hidden it. Isn’t that strange? I just came through here a day and a half ago. I’m sure it wasn’t over-grown like this then.”

He held the thick shrubbery back to make it easier for Kira to enter, and was pleased to see that her foot-steps, despite her injured feet, seemed firm and without pain.

“I can push things with my stick,” she told him. “See?” She raised her stick and used it to force up a thick vine that had reached from one tree to another on the other side of the path, making a barrier at the height of their shoulders. Together they ducked and went under the vine. But immediately they could see that there were others ahead, barring their approach.

“I’ll cut them,” Matty said. “Wait here.”

Kira stood waiting, Frolic suddenly quiet and wary at her feet, while Matty sliced through the vines at eye level ahead of them.

“Ow,” he said, and winced. An acidic sap dripped from the cut vines and burned where it landed on his arm. It seemed to eat through the thin cotton fabric of his sleeve. “Be careful not to let it drip on you,” he called to Kira, and motioned to her to come forward.

They made their way carefully through the passageway, which was a maze of vines, Matty in front with his knife. Again and again the sap spattered onto his arms until his sleeves were dotted with holes and the flesh beneath was burned raw. Their progress was very slow, and when finally the path widened, opened, and was free of the glistening growth—which they could see had already, amazingly, regrown and reblocked the path they had just walked—they stopped to rest. It had begun to rain. The trees were so thick above them that the downpour barely penetrated, but the foliage dripped and was cold on their shoulders.

“Do you have more of that herbal salve?” Matty asked.

Kira took it from her pocket and handed it to him. He had pushed back his sleeves and was examining his arms. Inflamed welts and oozing blisters had made a pattern on his skin.

“It’s from the sap,” he told her, and rubbed the salve onto the lesions.

“I guess my sweater was thick enough to protect me. Does it hurt?”

“No, not much.” But it wasn’t true. Matty didn’t want to alarm her, but he was in excruciating pain, as if his arms had been burned by fire. He had to hold his breath and bite his tongue to keep from crying out as he applied the salve.

For a brief moment, he thought that he might try to use his gift, to call forth the vibrating power and eradicate the stinging poisonous rash on his arms. But he knew he must not. It would take too much out of him—it would, in Leader’s words, *spend his gift*—and it would hamper their progress. They had to keep moving. Something so terrifying was happening that Matty did not even try to assess it.

Kira did not know. She had never made this journey before. She could feel the difficulties of this second day but did not realize they were unusual. She found herself able to laugh, not aware of the incredible pain that Matty was feeling in his singed and blistered arms. “Goodness,” she

said, chuckling, “I’m glad my clematis doesn’t grow that fast or that thick. I’d never be able to open my front door.”

Matty rolled his sleeves back down over the painful burns and returned the salve to Kira. He forced himself to smile.

Frolic was whimpering and trembling. “Poor thing,” Kira said, and picked him up. “Was that path scary? Did some of the sap drip on you?” She handed him to Matty.

He saw no wounds on the puppy, but Frolic was unwilling to walk. Matty tucked him inside his jacket, curling the ungainly legs and feet, and the puppy nestled there against his chest. He felt the little heart beat against his own.

“What’s that smell?” Kira asked, making a face. “It’s like compost.”

“There’s a lot of decaying stuff in the center of Forest,” he told her.

“Does it get worse?”

“I’m afraid it will.”

“How do you get through it? Do you tie a cloth around your nose and mouth?”

He wanted to tell her the truth. *I’ve never smelled it before. I’ve come through here a dozen, maybe two dozen, times, but I have never smelled it before. The vines have never been there. It has never been like this before.*

Instead, he said, “That’s the best method, I suppose. And your salve has a nice herbal odor. We’ll rub some of it on our upper lips, so it will block that foul smell.”

“And we’ll hurry through,” she suggested.

“Yes. We’ll go through as quickly as we can.”

The searing sensation in his arms had subsided, and now they simply throbbed and ached.

But his body felt hot and weak, as if he were ill. Matty wanted to suggest that they stop here and rest, that they spread the blanket and lie down for a while. But he had never rested at midday on previous journeys. And now they could not afford the time. They had to move forward, toward the stench. At least the vines were behind them now, and he didn’t see any ahead.

The cold rain continued to fall. He remembered, suddenly, how Jean’s hair curled and framed her face when it was damp. In contrast to the horrible stench that was growing stronger by the minute, he remembered

the fragrance of her when she had kissed him goodbye. It seemed so long ago.

"Come," he said, and gestured to Kira to follow.

Leader told the blind man that Matty and Kira had made it through the first night and were well into the second day. He murmured it from the chair where he was resting, lacking the strength to talk in his usual firm voice.

"Good," the blind man said cheerfully, unsuspecting. "And the puppy? How's Frolic? Could you see him?"

Leader nodded. "He's fine."

The truth was that the puppy was in better condition than Matty himself, Leader knew. So was Kira. Leader could see that Kira had had problems the first day, when Forest had punctured and wounded her. His gift had given him a glimpse of her bleeding feet. He had watched her rub on the salve and wince, and he had winced in sympathy. But she was managing well now. He could see, but did not tell the blind man, that now Forest was attacking Matty instead.

And he could see as well that they had not yet approached the worst of it.

Seventeen

BY THE SECOND afternoon Matty was in agony, and he knew there was still a day to go before the worst of it. His arms, poisoned by the sap, had festered and were seeping, swollen, and hot. The path was almost entirely overgrown now, and the bushes clawed at him, scraping at the infected burns until he was close to sobbing with the pain.

He could no longer delude Kira into thinking this was an ordinary journey. He told her the truth.

"What should we do?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "We could try to go back, I suppose, but you can see that the path back is blocked already. I don't think we could find the way, and I know I can't go through those vines again. Look at my arms."

He gingerly pulled back his ruined sleeve, and showed her. Kira gasped. His arms no longer looked like human limbs. They had swollen until the skin itself had split and was oozing a yellowish fluid.

"We're close to the center now," he explained, "and once we get through that, we'll be on the way out. But we still have a long way to go, and it will most likely get a lot worse than it is already."

She followed him, uncomplaining, for there was no other choice, but she was pale and frightened.

When they came, finally, to the pond where he ordinarily refilled his water container and sometimes caught some fish, he found it stagnant. Once clear and cool, the water was now dark brown, clogged with dead insects, and it smelled of kinds of filth he could only guess at.

So they were thirsty now.

The rain had stopped, but it left them clammy and cold.

The smell was much, much worse.

Kira smoothed the herbal salve on their upper lips and wrapped cloth around their noses and mouths to filter the stench. Frolic huddled, head down, inside Matty's shirt.

Suddenly the path, the same path he had always followed, ended abruptly at a swamp that had never been there before. Sharp, knifelike

reeds grew from glistening mud. There was no way around. Matty stared at it and tried to make a plan.

"I'm going to cut a thick piece of vine, Kira, to use as rope. Then I'll tie us together, so that if one of us should get stuck in some way . . ."

Bending his grotesquely swollen arm with difficulty, he reached with his knife and severed a length of heavy vine.

"I'll tie it," Kira said. "I'm good at that. I've knotted so much yarn and thread." Deftly she circled his waist, and then her own, with the length of supple vine. "Look," she told him, "it's quite fast." She tugged at the knots, and he could see that she had done a masterly job of connecting them to each other, leaving a length of vine between.

"I'll go first," Matty said, "to test the mud. The thing I'm most concerned about . . ."

Kira nodded. "I know. There are muds called quicksand."

"Yes. If I start to sink, you must pull hard to help me get out. I'll do the same for you."

Inch by inch they moved through the swamp, looking for thickets of growth on which to place their feet, testing the suction when they were forced into the thick mud. The razor-sharp reeds sliced mercilessly into their legs and mosquitoes feasted on the fresh blood. From time to time they pulled each other free when they were caught by the suction. Kira's sandals, first one and then the other, were sucked from her feet and disappeared.

Miraculously, Matty's shoes remained, coated with the slippery mud so that he appeared to be wearing heavy wet boots by the time he dragged himself from the other side of the swamp. He waited there, holding the vine rope steady, easing Kira through the mud and up the bank.

Then he used the knife and cut through the vine that had held them together in the swamp. "Look!" he said, pointing to his feet, encased in mud that was already drying into a crust. For a moment he had an odd desire to laugh at the grotesque thick boots.

Then he saw Kira's bare feet and shuddered. They were raw, dripping with blood from the reopened cuts she had previously suffered, and from new lacerations caused by the sharp swamp reeds. Matty climbed back down the bank, scooped wet mud with his hands, and gently coated her feet and legs, stopping the bleeding and trying to ease her pain with the thick cool paste.

He looked up through the tree growth to the sky, trying to assess the time of day. It had taken them a long time to cross the swamp. His arms were unusable, but he could still hold the knife in his swollen hands. Kira, her legs and feet in muddied shreds, knelt beside him, trying to catch her breath. The stench made it difficult for them to breathe, and he could feel the puppy choking from it inside his shirt.

He forced himself to speak with optimism.

"Follow me," he said. "I think the center is just ahead. And night is coming soon. We'll find a place to sleep, and then in the morning we'll start the final bit. Your father's waiting."

Slowly he moved forward, and Kira rose onto her ruined feet and followed him.

Matty felt his reason leave him now and again, and he began to imagine that he was outside of his own body. He liked that, escaping the pain. In his mind he drifted overhead, looking down on a struggling boy who pushed relentlessly through the dark, thorny undergrowth, leading a crippled girl. He felt sorry for the pair and wanted to invite them to soar and hover comfortably with him. But his bodiless self had no voice, and he was unable to call down to where they were.

These were daydreams, escapes, and they didn't last long.

"Can we stop for a minute? I need to rest. I'm sorry." Kira's voice was weak, and muffled by the cloth covering her mouth.

"Up here. There's a little opening. We'll have room to sit down." Matty pointed, and pushed ahead to the place he had seen. When they reached it, he shook his rolled blanket from his back and set it on the ground as a cushion. They sank down beside each other.

"Look." Kira pointed to the skirt of her dress, to show him. The blue fabric, discolored now, was in shreds. "The branches seem to reach for me," she said. "They're like knives. They cut my clothes"—she examined the ruined dress, with its long ragged tears—"but they don't quite reach my flesh. It's as if they're waiting. Teasing me."

For a terrible instant Matty remembered how Ramon had described poor Stocktender, who had been entangled by Forest and whose body had been found strangled by vines. He wondered if Forest had teased Stocktender first, burning and cutting him before the final moments of his hideous death.

“Matty? Say something.”

He shook himself. He had let his mind drift again. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what to say.

“How are your feet?” he thought to ask her.

He saw her shudder, and looked down. The encrusted mud he had applied as balm had fallen away. Her feet were nothing more than ragged flesh.

“And look at your poor arms,” she said. His torn sleeves were stained with seepage from his wounds.

He remembered the days of Village in the past, when a person who had difficulty walking would be helped cheerfully by someone stronger. When a person with an injured arm would be tended and assisted till he healed.

He heard sounds all around them and thought them to be the sounds of Village: soft laughter, quiet conversation, and the bustle of daily work and happy lives. But that was an illusion born of memory and yearning. The sounds he heard were the rasping croak of a toad, the stealthy movement of a rodent in the bushes, and foamy bubbles belching from some slithery malevolent creature in the dark waters of the pond.

“I’m really having trouble breathing,” Kira said.

Matty realized that he was, too. It was the heaviness of the air with its terrible smell. It was like a foul pillow held tightly to their faces, cutting off their air, choking them. He coughed.

He thought of his gift. Useless now. Probably he still had the strength and power to repair his own wounded arms or Kira’s tortured feet. But then the next onslaught would come, and the next, and he would be too weakened to resist it. Even now, looking listlessly down, he saw a pale green tendril emerge from the lower portion of a thorny bush and slide silently toward them. He watched in a kind of fascination. It moved like a young viper: purposeful, silent, and lethal.

Matty took his knife from his pocket again. When the sinister, curling stem—in appearance not unlike the pea vines that grew in early summer in their garden—reached his ankle, it began to curl tightly around his flesh. Quickly he reached down and severed it with the small blade. Within seconds it turned brown and fell away from him, lifeless.

But there seemed no victory to it. Only a pause in a battle he was bound to lose.

He noticed Kira reaching for her pack and spoke sharply to her. “What are you doing? We have to move on a minute. It’s dangerous here.” She hadn’t seen the deadly thing that had grabbed at Matty, but he knew there would be more; he watched the bushes for them.

It had come for him first, he realized. He did not want to be the first to die, to leave her alone.

To his dismay, she was removing her embroidery tools. “Kira! There’s no time!”

“I might be able to . . .” Then she deftly threaded a needle.

To what? he wondered bitterly. *To create a handsome wall-hanging depicting our last hours?* He remembered that in the art books he had leafed through at Leader’s, many paintings depicted death. A severed head on a platter. A battle, and the ground strewn with bodies. Swords and spears and fire; and nails being pounded into the tender flesh of a man’s hands. Painters had preserved such pain through beauty.

Perhaps she would.

He watched her hands. They flew over the small frame, moving in and out with the needle. Her eyes were closed. She was not directing her own fingers. They simply moved.

He waited, his eyes vigilant, watching the surrounding bushes for the next attack. He feared the coming dark. He wanted to move on, out of this place, before evening came. But he waited while her hands moved.

Finally she looked up. “Someone is coming to help us,” she said. “It’s the young man with the blue eyes.”

Leader.

“Leader’s coming?”

“He has entered Forest.”

Matty sighed. “It’s too late, Kira. He’ll never find us in time.”

“He knows just where we are.”

“He can see beyond,” he said, and coughed. “Have I already told you that? I can’t remember.”

“See beyond?” She had begun to pack her things away.

“It’s his gift. You see ahead. He sees beyond. And I . . .” Matty fell silent. He raised one hideously swollen arm and looked listlessly at the pus that seeped through the fabric of his sleeve. Then he laughed harshly. “I can fix a frog.”

Eighteen

THE BLIND MAN was alone now, with his fear, since Leader had gone. He had returned to his own house to wait, passing as he did the workers still preparing to build a wall surrounding Village.

In the yard beside the small homeplace he had shared happily with Matty for so long, he could smell the newly turned earth. Yesterday he had begun to dig a flower garden for his daughter, pushing in the spade and loosening the weeds for pulling.

Jean had stopped by to ask about Matty. She had admired Seer's work and told him she would bring seeds from her own flowers. They could have twin gardens, she said. She was looking forward to meeting the blind man's daughter. She had never had a big sister, and perhaps Kira would be that for her. He could hear the smile in her voice.

But that had been yesterday, and he had told Jean then, believing it to be true, that the travelers were fine, and on their way home.

This morning Leader, after standing motionless at the window for a long time, had told him the truth.

The blind man had cried out in anguish. "Both of them? *Both of my children?*"

Ordinarily Leader needed to rest after he looked beyond. But now he did not take the time. The blind man could hear him moving about the room, gathering things.

"Don't let Village know I'm gone," Leader told him.

"Gone? Where are you going?" The blind man was still reeling with the news of what was happening in Forest.

"To save them, of course. But I don't trust the wall builders. If they realize I'm not here to remind everyone of the proclamation, I think they'll start early. I don't want to get back here and not be able to reenter."

"Can you slip past them?"

"Yes, I know a back way. And they're all so absorbed in their work that they won't be looking for me. I'm the last person they want to see, anyway. They know how I feel about the wall."

The blind man was encouraged out of his despair by the optimism in Leader's voice. *To save them, of course.* He had said that. Maybe it could

be true.

“Do you have food? A warm jacket? Weapons? Maybe you’ll need weapons. I hate the thought of it.”

But Leader said no. “Our gifts are our weaponry,” he said. Then he hurried down the stairs.

Now, alone in his homeplace, a feeling of hopelessness returned to the blind man. He reached for the wall beside the kitchen and felt the edges of the tapestry hanging there, the one Kira had made for him. He let his fingers creep across it, feeling their way through the embroidered landscape. He had felt the tiny, even stitches often before, because he went to it and touched it when he was missing her. Now, on this shattered morning, he felt nothing but knots and snarls under his fingertips. He felt death, and smelled its terrible smell.

Nineteen

NIGHT WAS ENDING and they were still alive. Matty woke at dawn to find himself still curled next to Kira in the place where they had collapsed together after struggling as far as they could into the evening.

"Kira?" His voice was hoarse from thirst, but she heard him and stirred. She opened her eyes.

"I can't see very well," she whispered. "Everything is blurred."

"Can you sit up?" he asked.

She tried, and groaned. "I'm so weak," she said. "Wait." She took a deep breath and then painfully pushed herself into a sitting position.

"What's that on your face?" she asked him. He touched his upper lip where she pointed, and brought his hand away smeared with bright blood. "My nose is bleeding," he said, puzzled.

She handed him the cloth she had worn around her face the day before, and he held it against his nose to try to stem the flow of blood. "Do you think you can walk?" he asked her after a moment.

But she shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Matty."

He wasn't surprised. After the thorny branches had shredded her dress, they had reached for her legs as night fell, and now he could see that she was terribly lacerated. The wounds were deep, and he could see exposed muscles and tendons glisten yellow and pink in a devastating kind of beauty where the ragged flesh gaped open.

Matty himself could probably still stumble along. But his arms were completely useless now, and his hands seemed no more than huge paws. He could no longer even hold the knife with any strength.

As for Frolic, he didn't know. The little dog lay motionless against his chest.

He watched dully as a brown lizard with a darting tongue scrambled across their blanket with its tail flicking.

"You go on," Kira murmured. She lay back down and closed her eyes. "I'll just sleep."

He moved his damaged arms with some difficulty to her pack, which lay beside her where she had dropped it the night before. Through a haze of pain he realized that his fingers still moved awkwardly at his will, and he

used them to open her pack and remove the embroidery frame. Painstakingly, slowly, he threaded her needle. Then he shook her awake.

"Don't. I don't want to wake up."

"Kira," he said to her, "take this." He handed her the frame. "Just try one more time. Please. See where Leader is, if you can."

She blinked and looked at the frame as if it were unfamiliar. Matty put the threaded needle into her right hand. He was remembering something. It was something he had said once, to Leader, about meeting halfway.

But she had closed her eyes again. He spoke loudly to her. "Kira! Put the needle into the fabric. And try to *meet* him. Try, Kira!"

Kira sighed, and with a feeble gesture she inserted the needle into the cloth as he held the frame for her. He watched her hands. Nothing happened. Nothing changed. *"Again,"* he implored.

He saw her hands flutter, and the shimmer came.

Leader felt Forest's attack begin when he was two days in. Probably it had started earlier, with sharp twigs—he remembered now that one had barely missed his eye—but he had been so intent, then, on finding and following the path that he had not paid attention to the little wounds inflicted on him. He had strode through the deep woods with no thought of danger; he concentrated only on finding the pair that he had seen so close to death. He didn't eat or sleep.

He had begun to perceive the stench on the morning of the second day, and it served to hurry his steps. Without flinching, he brushed aside the grasping branches and ignored the thorns that scraped his arms and face.

He encountered a place where the path seemed simply to end. He stopped, puzzled, and examined the undergrowth. From somewhere nearby a shiny green frog emerged from the base of a bush.

Churrump.

Churrump.

It hopped and skittered toward him in the mud, then turned itself around and went forward. To his surprise, Leader followed the frog, pushing his way through thick bushes, and found that it had led him to the place where the path resumed. Relieved, for he had thought briefly that he was lost, he continued on. But now he recognized the attacks. Now he saw that it was not random thorny branches and his own clumsiness in walking into them, but rather an assault from Forest itself.

Suddenly the air surrounding him was abuzz with stinging insects. They flew at his face and bit mercilessly. He remembered, from his reading, descriptions of besieged medieval castles, and armies of men with bows sending so many arrows that the sky seemed thick with them. This felt like that. He felt pierced in a thousand places, and he cried out.

Then, just as suddenly, they were gone: regrouping, he thought, for another attack. He rushed forward, thinking to move away from this swampy area which harbored and bred such creatures. Indeed, the path did turn and led to drier ground, but here a sharp rock flung itself up and split the skin on his knee; then another sliced his hand so badly that he had to wrap the cut tightly in cloth for fear the loss of blood would weaken him beyond repair.

Stumbling and bleeding, he wished briefly that he had brought some kind of weapon. But what would have protected him against Forest itself? It was a force too huge to fight with a knife or a club.

Our gifts are our weaponry, he remembered saying to the blind man. It seemed so long ago that he had said it. He had felt certain of it at the time, but now he could not even think what he had meant.

He stood silently for a moment. His face was disfigured now, swollen from bites that oozed a dark fluid. Blood ran from his left ear, which had been gashed by a razor-sharp stone. One of his ankles was entangled by a vine that grew so quickly he could see it move, snaking its way toward his knee; he knew he would soon be immobilized by it, and the insects would return, then, to finish him off.

He faced what he knew to be the center of Forest, the place where Matty and Kira were trapped, and he willed himself to look beyond. It seemed the only thing left to do.

Twenty

"WHAT ARE YOU seeing?" Matty asked her in a hoarse voice.

But she didn't reply at first. Her eyes were closed. Her fingers moved as if in a dream. The needle went in and out, in and out.

He lifted his head to try to see. But his eyes were swollen, and when he raised himself, blood still flowed from his nose. So he lay back down, groaning from the effort, and in doing so felt the limp body of the puppy shift inside his shirt.

Matty had never experienced such an enormous sadness. His other dog had died in old age, peaceful and ready. But Frolic was only a puppy, new to life, and had been such a spirited creature, so curious and playful. It seemed impossible that he would have become a lifeless thing in such a short time.

But it was true of everything, he thought. His sadness was for all of it: for Village, no longer the happy place it had been; for Kira, no longer the sturdy, eager young woman he had always known. And Leader? He wondered what was happening to Leader now.

Suddenly Kira seemed to come awake. She whispered, "He's coming. He's close." Her voice was right beside him, very near to Matty's ear as he lay curled next to her. But it sounded, at the same time, far away, as if she were moving someplace distant.

The vine around his ankle tugged at him, bit into his flesh, anchored itself there, and sent a new shoot upward. Another snaked itself out of the bushes and curled around his foot. Leader didn't notice. He stood immobile, alert. His eyes were open but he was no longer seeing the vermin-ridden trees around him, their blighted leaves, or the foul dark mud under his feet. He was looking beyond, and he was seeing something beautiful.

"Kira," he said, though it was his mind that spoke, for his human voice was inaudible now and his mouth was painfully swollen with open sores.

"We need you," she replied, and it was her mind speaking, too. Matty, beside her, heard nothing but the soft flutter of her fingers moving on the fabric.

In the place called Beyond, Leader's consciousness met Kira's, and they curled around each other like wisps of smoke, in greeting.

"We are wounded," she told him, "and lost."

"I am hurt, too, and captured here," he replied.

With the exchange, they drifted dangerously apart. Where he stood, Leader could feel the vine now. His knee buckled as the sharp-toothed stem bit. He tried to reach for it but his hands were entangled, too.

With great effort, his consciousness touched hers again. "Ask the boy for help," he told her.

"Do you mean Matty?"

"Yes, though it is not his true name. Tell him we need his gift now. Our world does."

Matty felt Kira stir beside him. She opened her eyes. He watched as her tongue moved to moisten her blistered lips. When she spoke, her voice was so weak that he could not make out the words.

With difficulty he leaned painfully toward her, so that his ear was near her mouth.

"We need your gift," she whispered.

Matty fell back in despair. He had followed Leader's instructions. He had not spent the gift. He had not made Ramon well, had not fixed Kira's crooked leg, or even tried to save his little dog. But it was too late now. His body was so damaged he could barely move. He could no longer bend his ravaged arms. How could he place his hands on anything? And what, in any case, did she want him to touch? So much was ruined.

In agony and hopelessness, he turned away from her and rolled off the blanket and into the thick foul-smelling mud. With his arms outstretched, his hands touching the earth, he lay there waiting to die.

He felt his fingers begin to vibrate.

Twenty-one

IT BEGAN WITH the tiniest sensation. It was different from the larger feelings that still racked his body: the searing agony in his arms and hands, the almost unendurable ulceration of his parched mouth, the feverish pounding of his head.

This was a whispered hint of power. He felt it in the tips of his fingers, in the whorls and crevices of his outer skin. It moved across his hands as they lay motionless in the mud.

Though he shivered from illness and anguish, he could sense his blood beginning to warm and flow. He lay still. Inside him the thick dark liquid slid sinuously through his veins. It entered his heart and throbbed there, moving with purpose through the labyrinth of muscle, collecting energy that came faintly to it from his collapsing lungs. He could feel it surge into his arteries. Within the blood itself he could perceive its separate cells, and see their colors in his consciousness, and the prisms of their molecules, and all of it was awake now, gathering power.

He could feel his own nerves, each one, millions of them, taut with energy waiting to be released. The fibers of his muscles tightened.

Gasping, Matty called for his gift to come. There was no sense of how to direct it. He simply clawed at the earth, feeling the power in his hands enter, pulsating, into the ruined world. He became aware, suddenly, that he had been chosen for this.

Near him, Kira began to breathe more easily. What had been close to coma turned now to sleep.

Not far away, Leader tentatively lifted one foot and found it free of the entangling vine. He opened his eyes.

Back in Village, a breeze came up. It came through the windows of the homeplace where Ramon lived with his family. Ramon sat up suddenly in the bed, where he had lain ill for days, and felt the fever begin to seep from him.

The blind man sensed the breeze entering the open windows and lifting an edge of the tapestry on the wall. He felt the fabric, and found the stitches as even and smooth as they had been in the past.

Matty groaned and pressed his hands harder into the ground. All of his strength and blood and breath were entering the earth now. His brain and spirit became part of the earth. He rose. He floated above, weightless, watching his human self labor and writhe. He gave himself to it willingly, traded himself for all that he loved and valued, and felt free.

Leader walked forward. He wiped his face with his hands and felt the lesions fade, as if they had been cleansed away. He could see the path clearly now, for the bushes had drawn back, their leaves bright with new green growth and dappled with buds. A yellow butterfly lit on a bush, paused, and darted off. Rounded stones bordered the path, and sunlight filtered down through the canopy of trees. The air was fresh, and he could hear a stream flowing nearby.

Matty could see and hear everything. He saw Jean, beside her garden, call out in happy greeting to her father; and he saw Mentor, stooped once more, and balding, wave to her from the path where he was walking toward the schoolhouse with a book in his hand. His face was stained again with the birthmark, and poetry had returned to him. Matty heard him recite:

Today, the road all runners come,

Shoulder-high we bring you home,

And set you at your threshold down,

Townsman of a stiller town.

He saw the wall builders walk away from their work.

He heard the new ones singing in their own languages—a hundred different tongues, but they understood one another. He saw the scarred woman standing proudly in their midst beside her son, and the people of Village gathered to listen.

He saw Forest and understood what Seer had meant. It was an illusion. It was a tangled knot of fears and deceits and dark struggles for power that had disguised itself and almost destroyed everything. Now it was unfolding, like a flower coming into bloom, radiant with possibility.

Drifting there, he looked down and saw his own self becoming motionless. He felt his breathing slow. He sighed, let go, and felt a sense of peace.

He watched Kira wake, and he saw Leader find her there.

Kira took a cloth to the stream and brought it back, moistened, to wash Matty's still face. Leader had turned him over. She sobbed at the sight of him but was glad that his terrible wounds were gone. She bathed his arms and hands. The skin was firm and unblemished, without scars.

"I knew him when he was a little boy," she said, weeping. "He always had a dirty face and a mischievous spirit."

She smoothed his hair. "He called himself the Fiercest of the Fierce."

Leader smiled. "He was that. But it was not his true name."

Kira wiped her eyes. "He so hoped to receive his true name at the end of this journey."

"He would have."

"He wanted to be *Messenger,*" Kira confided.

Leader shook his head. "No. There have been other messengers, and there will be more to come." He leaned down and placed his hand solemnly on Matty's forehead above the closed eyes. "Your true name is *Healer,*" he said.

A sudden rustling in the bushes startled them both. "What's that?" Kira asked in alarm. At her voice, the puppy, his fur matted with twigs, emerged from the place where he had been hiding.

"It's Frolic!" Kira took him into her arms and he licked her hand.

Beside her, tenderly, Leader picked up what remained of the boy and prepared to carry him home. In the distance, the sound of keening began.

SON

In memory of Martin

Book I

Before

One

THE YOUNG GIRL cringed when they buckled the eyeless leather mask around the upper half of her face and blinded her. It felt grotesque and unnecessary, but she didn't object. It was the procedure. She knew that. One of the other Vessels had described it to her at lunch a month before.

"Mask?" she had asked in surprise, almost chuckling at the strange image. "What's the mask for?"

"Well, it's not really a mask," the young woman seated on her left corrected herself, and took another bite of the crisp salad. "It's a blindfold, actually." She was whispering. They were not supposed to discuss this among themselves.

"Blindfold?" she had asked in astonishment, then laughed apologetically. "I don't seem to be able to converse, do I? I keep repeating what you say. But: blindfold? Why?"

"They don't want you to see the Product when it comes out of you. When you birth it." The girl pointed to her bulging belly.

"You've produced already, right?" she asked her.

The girl nodded. "Twice."

"What's it like?" Even asking it, she knew it was a somewhat foolish question. They had had classes, seen diagrams, been given instructions. Still, none of that was the same as hearing it from someone who had already gone through the process. And now that they were already disobeying the restriction about discussing it—well, why not ask?

"Easier the second time. Didn't hurt as much."

When she didn't respond, the girl looked at her quizzically. "Hasn't anyone told you it hurts?"

"They said 'discomfort.'"

The other girl gave a sarcastic snort. "Discomfort, then. If that's what they want to call it. Not as much discomfort the second time. And it doesn't take as long."

"Vessels? VESSELS!" The voice of the matron, through the speaker, was stern. "Monitor your conversations, please! You know the rules!"

The girl and her companion obediently fell silent then, realizing they had been heard through the microphones embedded in the walls of the

dining room. Some of the other girls giggled. They were probably also guilty. There was so little else to talk about. The process—their job, their mission—was the thing they had in common. But the conversation shifted after the stern warning.

She had taken another spoonful of soup. Food in the Birthmothers' Dormitory was always plentiful and delicious. The Vessels were all being meticulously nourished. Of course, growing up in the community, she had always been adequately fed. Food had been delivered to her family's dwelling each day.

But when she had been selected Birthmother at twelve, the course of her life had changed. It had been gradual. The academic courses—math, science, law—at school became less demanding for her group. Fewer tests, less reading required. The teachers paid little attention to her.

Courses in nutrition and health had been added to her curriculum, and more time was spent on exercise in the outdoor air. Special vitamins had been added to her diet. Her body had been examined, tested, and prepared for her time here. After that year had passed, and part of another, she was deemed ready. She was instructed to leave her family dwelling and move to the Birthmothers' Dormitory.

Relocating from one place to another within the community was not difficult. She owned nothing. Her clothing was distributed and laundered by the central clothing supply. Her schoolbooks were requisitioned by the school and would be used for another student the following year. The bicycle she had ridden to school throughout her earlier years was taken to be refurbished and given to a different, younger child.

There was a celebratory dinner her last evening in the dwelling. Her brother, older by six years, had already gone on to his own training in the Department of Law and Justice. They saw him only at public meetings; he had become a stranger. So the last dinner was just the three of them, she and the parental unit who had raised her. They reminisced a bit; they recalled some funny incidents from her early childhood (a time she had thrown her shoes into the bushes and come home from the Childcare Center barefoot). There was laughter, and she thanked them for the years of her upbringing.

"Were you embarrassed when I was selected for Birthmother?" she asked them. She had, herself, secretly hoped for something more prestigious. At her brother's selection, when she had been just six, they

had all been very proud. Law and Justice was reserved for those of especially keen intelligence. But she had not been a top student.

"No," her father said. "We trust the committee's judgment. They knew what you would do best."

"And Birthmother is very important," Mother added. "Without Birthmothers, none of us would be here!"

Then they wished her well in the future. Their lives were changing too; parents no longer, they would move now into the place where Childless Adults lived.

The next day, she walked alone to the dormitory attached to the Birthing Unit and moved into the small bedroom she was assigned. From its window she could see the school she had attended, and the recreation field beyond. In the distance, there was a glimpse of the river that bordered the community.

Finally, several weeks later, after she was settled in and beginning to make friends among the other girls, she was called in for insemination.

Not knowing what to expect, she had been nervous. But when the procedure was complete, she felt relieved; it had been quick and painless.

"It that all?" she had asked in surprise, rising from the table when the technician gestured that she should.

"That's all. Come back next week to be tested and certified."

She had laughed nervously. She wished they had explained everything more clearly in the instruction folder they had given her when she was selected. "What does 'certified' mean?" she asked.

The worker, putting away the insemination equipment, seemed a little rushed. There were probably others waiting. "Once they're sure it implanted," he explained impatiently, "then you're a certified Vessel.

"Anything else?" he asked her as he turned to leave. "No? You're free to go, then."

That all seemed such a short time ago. Now here she was, nine months later, with the blindfold strapped around her eyes. The discomfort had started some hours before, intermittently; now it was nonstop. She breathed deeply as they had instructed. It was difficult, blinded like this; her skin was hot inside the mask. She tried to relax. To breathe in and out. To ignore the discom—*No,* she thought. *It is pain. It really is pain.*

Gathering her strength for the job, she groaned slightly, arched her back, and gave herself up to the darkness.

Her name was Claire. She was fourteen years old.

Two

THEY CLUSTERED AROUND her. She could hear them, when her mind was able to focus through the surging intermittent pain. They were talking urgently to each other. Something was wrong.

Again and again they checked her with their instruments, metallic and cold. A cuff on her arm was inflated, and someone pressed a metal disk there, at her elbow. Then a different device against her stretched and shaking belly. She gasped as another convulsive pain ripped through her. Her hands were tied on either side of the bed. She was unable to move.

Was it supposed to be like this? She tried to ask but her voice was too weak—mumbly and scared—and no one heard.

"Help me," she whimpered. But their attention, she sensed, was not on her, not really. They were worried about the Product. Their hands and tools were on her taut middle. It had been hours, now, since all this began, the first twinge, then the rhythmic, hardening pain, and later, the buckling on of the mask.

"Put her out. We'll have to go in for it." It was a commanding voice, clearly someone in charge. "Quickly." There was a startling urgency to it.

"Breathe deeply," they ordered her, shoving something rubbery up under the mask, holding it to her mouth and nose. She did. She had no choice. She would have suffocated otherwise. She inhaled something with an unpleasantly sweet scent, and immediately the pain subsided, her thoughts subsided, her being drifted away. Her last sensation was the awareness, pain-free, of something cutting into her belly. Carving her.

She emerged to a new, different pain, no longer the throbbing agony but now a broad, deep ache. She felt freed, and realized that her wrists were unshackled. She was still on the bed, covered with a warm blanket. Metal rails had been lifted with a clanking sound, so she was protected on either side. The room was empty now. No attendants or technicians, no equipment. Only Claire, alone. She turned tentatively, assessing the emptiness of the room with her eyes, and then tried to lift her head but was forced back by the pain the attempt caused. She couldn't look down at her own body but carefully moved her hands to rest there on what had been her

own taut, swollen belly. It was flat now, bandaged, and very sore. The Product was what they had carved out of her.

And she missed it. She was suffused with a desperate feeling of loss.

"You've been decertified."

Three weeks had passed. She had recuperated in the Birthing Unit for the first week, tended and checked—pampered a bit, actually, she realized. But there was an awkwardness to everything. There with her were other young women, recovering, so there was pleasant conversation, a few jokes about being slender again. Their bodies, hers as well, were massaged each morning, and their gentle exercise was supervised by the staff. Her recuperation was slower, though, than the others', for she had been left with a wound and they had not.

After the first week they were moved to an interim place, where they amused themselves with talk and games before returning two weeks later to the large, familiar group of Vessels. Back they went, to the Dormitory, greeting old friends—many of them larger in size now, their bellies growing as they waited—and taking their places again in the group. They all looked alike, in their shapeless, smocklike dresses, with their identical haircuts; but personalities distinguished them. Nadia was funny, making a joke of everything; Miriam very solemn and shy; Suzanne was organized and efficient.

As Vessels returned following Production, there was surprisingly little talk of the Task. "How did it go?" someone would ask, and the reply would be a nonchalant shrug, and "All right. Fairly easy." Or a wry "Not too bad," with a face indicating that it had not been pleasant.

"Good to have you back."

"Thanks. How were things here while I was gone?"

"The same. Two new Vessels, just arrived. And Nancy's gone."

"What did she get?"

"Farm."

"Good. She wanted that."

It was casual talk, inconsequential. Nancy had delivered her third Product not long before. After the third, the Vessels were reassigned. Farm. Clothing Factory. Food Delivery.

Claire remembered that Nancy had hoped for Farm. She liked the outdoors, and a particular friend of hers had been assigned Farm some

months before; she hoped to spend the next part of her working life in the company of someone she enjoyed. Claire felt happy for her.

But she was apprehensive about her own future. Although her memory was hazy, she knew that something had gone wrong at her own Production. It was clear that no one else had ended up with a wound. She had tried, somewhat shyly, to ask the others, those who had produced more than once. But they seemed shocked and confused by her questions.

“Is your belly still sore?” Claire whispered to Miriam, who had been in the recuperation place with her.

“Sore? No,” Miriam had replied. They were sitting beside each other at breakfast.

“Mine is, just where the scar is. When I press on it,” Claire explained, touching her hand gently to the place.

“Scar?” Miriam made a face. “I don’t have a scar.” She turned away and joined another conversation.

Claire tried again, carefully asking a few other Vessels. But no one had a scar. No one had a wound. After a while, her own ache subsided, and she tried to ignore the uneasy awareness that something had gone very wrong.

Then she was called in. “Claire,” the voice from the speaker announced at midday while the Vessels were eating, “please report to the office immediately after lunch.”

Flustered, Claire looked around. Across the table was Elissa, a special friend. They had been selected the same year, both Twelves at the same time, and so she had known Elissa through her school years. But Elissa was newer here; she had not been inseminated as soon as Claire. Now she was in the early stages of her first Production.

“What’s that about?” Elissa asked her when they heard the directive.

“I don’t know.”

“Did you do something wrong?”

Claire frowned. “I don’t think so. Maybe I forgot to fold my laundry.”

“They wouldn’t call you in for that, would they?”

“I don’t think so. It’s so minor.”

“Well,” Elissa said, beginning to stack her empty dishes, “you’ll find out soon enough. It’s probably nothing. See you later!” She left Claire still sitting at the table.

But it was not nothing. Claire stood facing them in dismay as the committee told her of their decision. She had been decertified.

“Gather your things,” they told her. “You’ll be moved this afternoon.”

“Why?” she asked. “Was it because . . . well, I could tell that something went wrong, but I . . .”

They were kind, solicitous. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“What wasn’t my fault?” she asked, aware that she shouldn’t press them but unable to stop herself. “If you could just explain . . . ?”

The committee head shrugged. “These things happen. A physical problem. It should have been detected sooner. You should not have been inseminated. Who was your first Examiner?” he asked.

“I don’t remember her name.”

“Well, we’ll find out. Let’s hope it was her first error, so that she will have another chance.”

They dismissed her then, but she turned at the door because she could not leave without asking.

“My Product?”

He looked at her dismissively, then relented. He turned to another committee member near him at the table and nodded to the papers in front of her, directing her to look up the information.

“What number was it?” the woman asked him, but he ignored the question. “Well,” she said, “I’ll check by name. You’re—Claire?”

As if they didn’t know. They had summoned her here by name. But she nodded.

She moved her finger down a page. “Yes. Here you are. Claire: Product number Thirty-six. Oh yes, I see the notations about the difficulties.”

She looked up. Claire touched her own belly, remembering.

The woman returned the paper to the pile and tapped the edges of the stack to make it tidy. “He’s fine,” she said.

The committee head glared at her.

“It.” She corrected herself. “I meant that it’s fine. The medical difficulties didn’t affect it.

“You’ll be fine too, Claire,” she added, affably.

“Where am I going?” Claire asked. Suddenly she was frightened. They hadn’t yet said she was being reassigned. Just decertified. So she would no longer be a Birthmother. That made sense. Her body had not performed that function well. But what if—? What if decertified people were simply released? The way failures often were?

But their reply was reassuring. “Fish Hatchery,” the committee head told her. “You’re being moved there. They need help; they’re short of workers. Your training will start in the morning. You’ll have to catch up. Luckily you have a quick mind.”

He dismissed her now with a wave of his hand, and Claire went back to the Dormitory to gather her few things. It was rest time. The other Vessels were all napping, the doors to their cubicle-like rooms closed.

He, she thought as she packed the few personal items that she had. It was a *he*. I produced a baby boy. *I had a son.* The feeling of loss overwhelmed her again.

Three

"YOU'LL BE ISSUED a bicycle." The man—his name-tag said DIMITRI, HATCHERY SUPERVISOR—gestured toward the area where bicycles were standing in racks. He had met her at the door, unsurprised by her arrival. Obviously he had been notified that she was on her way.

Claire nodded. Confined to the Birthing Unit and its surrounding grounds for over a year now, she had not needed any kind of transportation. And she had walked here, carrying her small case of belongings, from the Birthmothers' area to the northeast. It wasn't far, and she knew the route, but after so many months, everything seemed new and unfamiliar. She had passed the school and saw children at their required exercise in the recreation field. None seemed to recognize her, though they looked curiously at the young woman walking along the path at midday. It was unusual. Most people were at their jobs. Those who needed to be out and about were on bicycles making their way from one building to another. No one walked. A small girl with hair ribbons grinned at Claire from the exercise routine, and waved surreptitiously; Claire smiled back, remembering her own beribboned days, but an instructor called sharply to the child, who made a face and turned back to the assigned calisthenics.

Across the Central Plaza, she caught a glimpse, in the Dwelling area, of the small house where she had grown up. Other people would live there now, couples newly assigned to each other, perhaps waiting for . . .

She averted her eyes from the Nurturing Center. It was, she knew, where the Products were taken after the birthing. Usually in groups. Early morning, most often. Once, sleepless at dawn, she had watched from the window of her cubicle and seen four Products, tucked into baskets, loaded into a two-wheeled cart attached to the back of a bicycle. After checking their security in the cart, the birthing attendant had ridden off toward the Nurturing Center to deliver them there.

She wondered if her own Product, her boy, number Thirty-six, had been taken to the Nurturing Center yet. Claire knew that they waited—sometimes days, occasionally weeks, making certain that everything was going well, that the Products were healthy—to make the transfer.

Well. She sighed. Time to put it out of her mind. She walked on, past the hall of Law and Justice. Peter, whom she had once known as a teasing older brother, would be inside, at work. If he glanced through a window and saw a young woman walking slowly past, would he know it was Claire? Would he care?

Past the House of Elders, the place where the governing committee lived and studied. Past small office buildings; past the bicycle repair shop; and now she could see the river that bordered the community, its dark water moving swiftly, foaming around rocks here and there. Claire had always feared the river. As children they had been warned of its dangers. She had known of a young boy who had drowned. There were rumors, likely untrue, of citizens who had swum across, or even made their way across the high, forbidden bridge and disappeared into the unknown lands beyond. But she was fascinated by it too—its constant murmur and movement, and the mystery of it.

She crossed the bike path, waiting politely until two young women had pedaled by. To her left she could see the shallow fish-holding ponds and remembered how, as younger children, she and her friends had watched the silvery creatures darting about.

Now she would be working here, at the Hatchery. And living here too, she assumed, at least until . . . until when? Citizens were given dwellings when they were assigned spouses. Birthmothers never had spouses, so she had not thought about it until now. Now she wondered. Was she eligible now for a spouse, and eventually for—? Claire sighed. It was troubling, and confusing, to think about such things. She turned away from the holding ponds, made her way to the front door of the main building, and was met there by Dimitri.

That night, alone in the small bedroom she'd been assigned, Claire looked down from her window to the darkened, surging river below. She yawned. It had been a long and exhausting day. This morning she had awakened in her familiar surroundings, the place where she had lived for so many months, but by midday her entire life had shifted. She had not had a chance to say goodbye to her friends, the other Vessels. They would be wondering where she had gone, but would likely forget her soon. She had taken her place here, been issued a nametag, and been introduced to the other workers. They seemed pleasant enough. Some, older than Claire, had

spouses and dwellings, and left at the end of the day's work. Others, like herself, lived here, in rooms along the corridor. One, Heather, had been the same year as Claire; she had been a Twelve at the same ceremony. Surely she would remember Claire's Assignment as Birthmother. Her eyes flickered in recognition when they were introduced, but Heather said nothing. Neither did Claire. There was nothing really to say.

She supposed that she and the younger workers, including Heather, would become friends, of a sort. They would sit together at meals and go in groups to attend community entertainments. After a while they would have shared jokes, probably things about fish, phrases that would make them chuckle. It had been that way with the other Vessels, and Claire found herself missing, already, the easy camaraderie among them. But she would fit in here. Everyone welcomed her cheerfully and said they'd be glad of her help.

The work wouldn't be hard. She had been allowed to watch the lab attendants, in gowns and gloves, strip eggs from what they called the breeder fish, anesthetized females. A little like squeezing toothpaste, she thought, amused at the image. Nearby, other attendants squeezed what they told her was "milt" from the male; then they added the creamy substance to the container that held the fresh eggs. It had to be very precisely timed, they explained. And antiseptic. They worried about contamination, and bacteria. The temperature made a difference as well. Everything was carefully controlled.

In a nearby room lit by dim red lights, she had watched another gloved worker look through trays of stacked fertilized eggs.

"See those spots?" the worker had asked Claire. She pointed to the tray of glistening pink eggs. Claire peered down and saw that most of them had two dark spots. She nodded.

"Eyes," the girl told her.

"Oh," Claire said, amazed that already, so young and tiny that she could hardly think of it as a fish, it had eyes.

"See here?" Using a metal tool, the girl pointed to a discolored, eyeless egg. "This one's dead." Carefully she plucked it from the tray with her forceps and discarded it in the sink. Then she returned the tray to its rack and reached for the next one.

"Why did it die?" Claire asked. She found that she was whispering. The room was so dimly lit, so quiet and cool, that her voice was hushed.

But the worker replied in a normal tone, very matter-of-fact. “I don’t know. The insemination went wrong, I guess.” She shrugged and removed another dead egg from the second tray. “We have to take them out so they don’t contaminate the good ones. I check them every day.”

Claire felt a vague discomfort. *The insemination had gone wrong.* Was that what had happened to her? Had her Product, like the discolored, eyeless egg, been thrown aside someplace? But no. They had told her that number Thirty-six was “fine.” She tried to set aside her troubling thoughts and pay attention to the worker’s voice and explanations.

“Claire?” The door opened and it was Dimitri, the supervisor, looking for her. “I want to show you the dining room. And they have your schedule almost ready to give you.”

So she had continued her tour of the facility, and been instructed in her next day’s duties (cleaning, mostly—everything had to be kept spotless), and later she had had supper with a group of the workers who lived, as she would now, at the Hatchery. They talked, mostly, about what they had done during recreation time. There was an hour allotted each day when they could do whatever they liked. Someone mentioned a bike ride and a picnic lunch along the river; apparently the kitchen staff would pack your lunch in a basket if you asked in advance. Two young men had joined a ball game. Someone had watched repairs being done on the bridge. It was aimless, pleasant chat, but it served to remind Claire that she was freer now than she had been in a long time. She could go for a walk after lunch, she thought, or in the evening.

Later, in her room, thinking, she realized what she wanted to do when she had time. Not just an ordinary walk. She wanted to try to find a girl named Sophia, a girl her own age, a girl who had turned twelve when Claire did. They had not been particular friends, just acquaintances and schoolmates who had happened to share a birth year. But Sophia had been seated next to Claire at the ceremony when they were given their Assignments.

“Birthmother,” the Chief Elder had announced when it was Claire’s turn to stand and be acknowledged. She had shaken the Chief Elder’s hand, smiled politely at the audience, taken her official Assignment papers, and gone back to her seat. Sophia had stood, next.

“Nurturer,” the Chief Elder had named Sophia.

It had meant little to Claire, then. But now it meant that Sophia, an assistant at first, probably by now fully trained, was working in the Nurturing Center, the place where Claire's Product—her child, her baby—was being held, and fed.

Days passed. Claire waited for the right time. Usually the workers took their breaks in pairs or groups. People would wonder if she wandered off alone during a break; there would be murmurs about her, and questions. She didn't want that. She needed them to see her as hard-working and responsible, as someone ordinary, someone without secrets.

So she waited, worked, and began to fit in. She made friends. One lunchtime she joined several coworkers in a picnic along the riverbank. They leaned their bikes against nearby trees and sat on some flat rocks in the high grass while they unpacked the prepared food. Nearby, on the path, two young boys rode by on their bikes, laughing at something, and waved to them.

"Hey, look!" One boy was pointing. "Supply boat!"

Eagerly the two youngsters dropped their bikes and scrambled down the sloping riverbank to watch as the bargelike boat passed, its open deck heavy with wooden containers of various sizes.

Rolf, one of the picnickers, looked at his watch and then at the boys. "They're going to be late getting back to school," he commented with a wry smile.

The others all chuckled. Now that they were finished with school, it was easy to be amused by the regulations that they had all lived by as children. "I was late once," Claire told them, "because a groundskeeper sliced his hand when he was pruning the bushes over by the central offices. I stopped and watched while they bandaged him and took him off to the infirmary for stitches.

"I used to hope I'd be assigned Nursing Attendant," she added.

There was an awkward silence for a moment. Claire wasn't certain if they knew her background. Undoubtedly there had been some explanation given for her sudden appearance at the Hatchery, but probably they had been told no details. To have failed at one's Assignment—to be reassigned—had something of a shame to it. No one would ever mention it, if they did know. No one would ask.

“Well, the committee knows best,” Edith commented primly as she passed sandwiches around. “Anyway, there’s an element of nursing at the Hatchery. All the labs and procedures.”

Claire nodded.

“Hatchery wouldn’t have been my first choice,” a tall young man named Eric said. “I was really hoping for Law and Justice.”

“My brother’s there,” Claire told him.

“Does he like it?” Eric asked with interest.

Claire shrugged. “I guess so. I never see him. He was older. Once he finished his training, he moved away from our dwelling. He might even have a spouse by now.”

“You’d know that,” Rolf pointed out. “You see the Spouse Assignments at the Ceremony.

“I’ve applied for a spouse,” he added, grinning. “I had to fill out about a thousand forms.”

Claire didn’t tell them that she had not attended the last two ceremonies. Birthmothers did not leave their quarters during their years of production. Claire had never seen a Vessel until she became one. She had not known, until she had both experienced and observed it, that human females swelled and grew and reproduced. No one had told her what “birth” meant.

“Look!” Eric said suddenly. “The supply boat’s stopping at the Hatchery. Good! I put in an order quite a while ago.” He glanced down at the riverbank, where the two youngsters were still watching the boat. “Boys!” he called. When they looked up, he pointed to the watch on his own wrist. “The school bell is going to ring in less than five minutes!”

Reluctantly they climbed back up the bank and went to retrieve their bikes. “Thank you for the reminder,” one said politely to Eric.

“You think the supply boat will still be there after school?” the other boy asked eagerly.

But Eric shook his head. “They unload quickly,” he told the boy, who looked disappointed.

“I wish I could be a boat worker,” they could hear one boy say to the other as they set their bikes upright. “I bet they go lots of places we don’t even know about. I bet if I were working on a supply boat, I’d get to see —”

“If we don’t get back on time,” his friend said nervously, “we’re not going to be assigned *anything!* Come on, let’s get going!”

The boys rode away toward the school building in the distance.

"I wonder what he thought he'd get to see, as a boat worker," Rolf commented. They began to tidy up the picnic and to pack away the uneaten food.

"Other places. Other communities. The boats must make a lot of stops." Eric folded the napkins and placed them in the basket.

"They'd all be the same. What's so exciting about seeing a different hatchery, a different school, a different nurturing center, a different—"

Edith interrupted them. "It's pointless to speculate," she said in her terse, businesslike tone. "Accomplishes nothing. 'Wondering' is very likely against the rules, though I suppose it isn't a serious infringement."

Eric rolled his eyes and handed Rolf the basket. "Here," he said. "Strap this on your bike and take it back, would you? I have to do an errand. I told the lab chief that I'd pick up some stuff at the Supply Center."

Rolf, attaching the basket to his bike by its transportation straps, commented, "It might be nice to travel on the river, though, just for the trip. Fun to see new things. Even," he added facetiously, "if you haven't wondered about them."

Edith ignored that.

"Could be dangerous," Eric pointed out. "That water's deep." He looked around, making sure they had collected everything. "Ready to go back?" Claire and Edith nodded and moved their bikes to the path. Eric waved and rode off on his errand.

Even if it might be against the rules, some kind of infringement (it would be hard to know without studying the thick book of community regulations, though it was always available on the monitor in the Hatchery lobby, but there were pages and pages of very small print, and no one ever bothered to look at it, as far as Claire could tell), there would be no way for anyone to get caught in the act of wondering, Claire thought. It was an invisible thing, like a secret. She herself spent a great deal of time at it . . . wondering.

Pedaling back, she rehearsed in her mind, silently, how easy it would be to say in a casual voice, "I have to run an errand." How she could slip away—it wouldn't take long—and ride over to the Nurturing Center, to find Sophia and ask some questions.

Four

THEN THE OCCASION came.

"I just realized that the biology teacher never returned the posters I let him use," Dimitri said irritably at lunch. "And I'll need them tomorrow morning."

"I'll go get them," Claire offered.

"Thanks." The lab director nodded in her direction. "That's a help. There will be a group of volunteers starting indoctrination, and the visual aids make things easier."

They were eating in the Hatchery cafeteria, six of them at the same table. There was no assigned seating, and today Claire, balancing her tray of prepared food, had made her way to an empty chair at this table where the director was already sitting with several technicians. He was talking about a set of demonstration posters that he liked to use when there were visitors being given a tour of the facility. The biology teacher had borrowed them and they had not yet been returned.

"Notify the school. They'll have a student bring them." One of the technicians had finished eating and was tidying his tray. "And they'll chastise the teacher," he added, with a malicious chuckle, as he stood.

"No need," Claire said. "I have another errand over that way. It'll be easy for me to stop by the school." That wasn't really a lie, she told herself. Lying was against the rules. They all knew that, abided by it. And she hadn't made it up, the other errand she had mentioned. She only hoped no one would ask her what it was. But their attention was elsewhere now. They were crumpling their napkins, looking at their watches, preparing to return to work.

It was her chance to look for Sophia.

Her stop at the school was brief, and the biology teacher didn't recognize her. Claire had never studied biology. At twelve, when the selections were made and the future jobs assigned, the children's education took different paths. Some in her group—she remembered a boy named Marcus, who excelled in school and was assigned a future as an engineer—would continue on and learn various sciences. He had probably completed

biology by now, she guessed, and would be studying higher mathematics, or astrophysics, or biochemistry, one of the subjects that was whispered about, when they were young, as incomprehensibly difficult. Marcus wouldn't be in this ordinary school anymore, but in one of the higher education buildings reserved for scholars.

Though she had been young at the time, Claire remembered when Peter, her brother, had moved on to higher education. Maybe Peter had even learned biology in school. But then he had been transferred over to the law buildings, for his clerkship and studies.

The hallways were familiar, and she found the biology classroom without difficulty.

"I had intended to return these," the biology teacher told her, handing Claire the rolled-up posters. "Would you please tell him that I didn't realize he would need them back so soon?" He sounded slightly annoyed.

"Yes, I'll tell him. Thank you." Claire left the teacher there at his desk in the classroom and made her way down the hall toward the front door. She glanced into the empty rooms. School hours had ended and the children had gone to their various volunteer jobs in the community. But she was familiar with some of the rooms, and she recognized a language teacher who leaned over a desk, packing things into a briefcase. Claire nodded uncertainly when the woman looked up and saw her.

"Claire, is it?" The teacher smiled. "What a surprise! What—"

But she didn't continue the question, though the look on her face was curious. Certainly the teacher would have remembered her selection as Birthmother, and clearly a Birthmother had no business in the school, or in fact anywhere in the day-to-day geography of the community. But it would have been extremely rude to ask why Claire was there. So the teacher cut off her own question and simply smiled in greeting.

"I'm just here collecting something," Claire explained, holding up the cylinder of posters. "It's nice to see you again."

She continued down the hall and out through the front entrance of the education building, and took her bicycle from the rack by the steps. Carefully she attached the bundle of papers securely to the holder on the back of the bike. Nearby, a gardener transplanting a bush glanced at her without interest. Two children on bicycles pedaled past quickly, rushing toward something, probably worried about being late for their required volunteer hours.

Everything was familiar, unchanged, but it still felt odd to Claire to be back in the community again. She had not ventured far from the Hatchery before this, just the short excursions with her coworkers. *Over there,* she thought, looking down the path she had ridden to get to the school, *I can almost see the dwelling where I grew up.*

Briefly she wondered about her parents, whether they ever thought of her—or, for that matter, of Peter. They had raised two children successfully, fulfilling the job of Adults with Spouses. Peter had achieved a highly prestigious Assignment. And she, Claire, had not. *Birthmother.* At the ceremony, standing on the stage to receive her Assignment, she had not been able to see her parents' faces in the crowd. But she could imagine how they looked, how disappointed they would have been. They had hoped for more from their female child.

"There's honor in it," she remembered her mother saying reassuringly that night. "Birthmothers provide our future population."

But it felt a little like those times when they had opened the dinner delivery containers to find that the evening meal would be grains prepared with fish oil. "High vitamin D," her mother would say in that same cheerful voice, in an attempt to make the meal seem more appealing than it really was.

Claire biked away from the education buildings and hesitated at the corner, where several paths intersected. She could turn right and ride past the back of Law and Justice, straight along that path, and be back at the Hatchery in a few minutes. But instead, she continued straight, then turned left, so that the House of the Old, surrounded by trees, was just ahead of her. She turned right here and slowed her bicycle near the Childcare Center, steering carefully around a food delivery vehicle being unloaded. Then she made her way straight ahead toward the Nurturing Center.

It was surprising, she thought, as she approached the structure, that she had never spent volunteer hours there as a schoolgirl. She had worked often at the Childcare Center, and had enjoyed the time playing educational games with the toddlers and young children, but infants—they were called newchildren—had never interested her. Some of her friends and age-mates had thought the little ones "cute." But not Claire. From what she had heard described, they were endless work—feeding, rocking, bathing—and they cried too much. She had avoided doing her hours there.

Now, planning how she would present herself at the entrance to the Nurturing Center, Claire realized that she was excited, and a little nervous. She rehearsed what she might say when she went inside. To ask for Sophia would be foolish. Sophia would probably barely remember her; they had not been particular friends. But why else would she be appearing there, asking to enter?

Well, Claire decided abruptly, she would lie once again. Against the rules. She knew that. Once, she would have cared. Now she didn't. As simple as that. And it was just a small lie.

She wheeled her bicycle into the rack where several slots had been left open for visitors. Then she disengaged the rolled posters from the carrier and took them with her to the front door. Inside, a young woman sitting at a desk looked up from her papers and smiled at her. "Good afternoon," she said politely, peering at Claire's nametag. "Can I help you?"

Claire introduced herself. "I'm a worker at the Hatchery," she explained. "We have these extra posters explaining the life cycle of salmon. I was wondering if you could use some to decorate your walls."

If the young woman said yes, she realized, she would have some explaining to do to the Hatchery director, who was at this very moment expecting his posters back. But it was a pretty safe assumption that the answer would be no. Who would care about examining the growth of fish? It wasn't even that interesting to those who worked with them.

And, indeed, the young woman smiled and shook her head. "Thank you," she said, "but we have specially designed equipment to engage the attention of newchildren. We don't deviate from the standard means of helping them to focus their attention span and to exercise their small muscles. Everything's pretty carefully calibrated by the experts in infant development."

Claire nodded. "Interesting," she said. "I'm sorry I never volunteered here. I don't know much about nurturing at all. Do you ever let visitors have a tour?"

The receptionist appeared pleased at her interest. "Never been here at all? My goodness! It's such a fun place! You should certainly take a look, since you're here anyway! Let me see who's on duty." She ran her finger down a list of names.

"Is Sophia here?" Claire asked. "She was with my age group."

“Oh, Sophia! She’s such a diligent worker. Let me look. Yes—there’s her name. Let’s see if she’s available.”

Summoned through the intercom by the receptionist, Sophia entered the front hallway from a corridor on the side. She hadn’t changed much since they had both been twelve almost three years before. She was thin, with her hair pulled back under a cap, which seemed to be part of her uniform. Claire smiled at her. “Hi,” she said. “I don’t know if you remember me. I was a Twelve when you were. My name’s Claire.”

Sophia looked at Claire’s nametag and nodded with a small smile of recognition, after a moment. “We don’t wear nametags,” Sophia explained, “because the newchildren would grab at them. But I remember you. I think we were in the same math class.”

“I hated math. I was never very good at it.” Claire made a face.

Sophia chuckled. “I did pretty well, but it never interested me much. Remember Marcus? He got such high marks in math! He’s in engineering studies now.”

Claire nodded. “He was always studying,” she recalled.

Sophia frowned and peered toward the small print under Claire’s name on her nametag. “I forget what your Assignment was,” she said. “Your uniform is . . .”

“Fish Hatchery,” Claire explained quickly. Good. Sophia didn’t remember that she had been assigned Birthmother.

“And so what are you doing here?”

“Hoping to get a tour!” Claire told her. “Somehow I missed out on the whole Nurturing section. And I have a little free time this afternoon.”

“Oh. Well, all right. You can follow along and I’ll explain things. But I have to work. It’s almost feeding time. Come on. Clean your hands first.” Sophia pointed to a disinfectant dispenser on the wall of the corridor, and Claire followed her example, rubbing her hands carefully with the clear medicinal liquid.

“The youngest ones are in this first room.” Youngest ones. That meant the most recent newchildren. Claire thought back, and remembered which of her sister Vessels had been preparing to give birth when she was dismissed. These would be their Products.

“We can’t go in this one without changing to sterile uniforms. But we can look at them.” Sophia pointed through a window to a spotlessly clean area filled with small wheeled carts, many empty. Two workers, a young

man in a nurturer's uniform and a volunteer, a girl of ten or so, were tidying things. They looked up at the window, saw the two observers, and smiled.

"How many newest?" Sophia called through the glass. The volunteer held up four fingers. Then she moved to one of the carts and pushed it closer to the window so Sophia and Claire could see. A card on the side had a gender symbol indicating Female, and the number 45.

"Forty-five?" Claire asked, looking down at the infant, who was wrapped tightly in a light blanket with only its small face exposed. The eyes were tightly closed. "What's that mean?"

Sophia looked at her in surprise. "Number forty-five. Forty-fifth newchild this year. Just five more to come. Don't you remember? We all had numbers. I was Twenty-seven."

"Oh. Yes, of course. I was one of the earliest ones our year. I was number Eleven."

And she did remember, now that Sophia had reminded her. After age twelve, the numbers didn't matter much, were rarely referred to. But being number Eleven had served her well when she was young. It had meant she was the eleventh newchild her year—older, therefore, than so many others (like Sophia) who had been later to walk and talk, later to shoot up in height. By twelve, of course, most of that evened out. But Claire could remember being a Five, and a Six, and proud that she was a little ahead of so many others.

"What about the other ones in this year's batch?" Claire asked.

Sophia gestured. "The oldest—numbers One to Ten? They're in that room over there. A couple of them can walk already." She rolled her eyes. "It's really a nuisance to chase after them." She started down the hall and turned a corner, Claire following. "Then the next oldest are here." Another large window allowed the two young women to look into a room where a group of infants crawled on the carpeted floor strewn with toys, while their attendants prepared bottles at a counter and sink against the wall.

"So they're arranged in groups of ten?"

Sophia nodded. "Five rooms, and ten in each, when we have our full fifty. Right now we still have a few newborns due to come in. Then, when we reach fifty, no more till after the next Ceremony." She waved cheerfully at the volunteer putting the bottles into the warming device, and the young girl grinned and waved back.

“Then, of course, after this year’s fifty are assigned, we start fresh, after the Ceremony, with new ones coming in gradually. It’s like a little vacation!”

“It’s a while, still, till the Ceremony. But you almost have the full fifty?”

“It’s timed, over at the Birthing Unit, so we don’t get a batch of newborns late in the year. Parents being given newchildren don’t want brand-new ones.”

“Too much work?”

“Not really. You saw, a minute ago—those newest ones? They mostly sleep. But it’s a lot of responsibility, keeping everything sterile. Also, you can’t *play* with the new ones. Parents like to play with their children when they get them.”

Claire was half listening. *Thirty-six*, she thought. Her Product had been number Thirty-six. She had kept the number firmly in her mind.

“So next is the third ten?” she asked. “Let me think. One to Ten. Then this group is Eleven to Twenty. The next group will be Twenty-one to Thirty, right?”

“Yes. Over there, across the hall. I usually work with that group. I’m going to have to go back in, in a minute, to help feed.” Claire glanced through the window that displayed Sophia’s group of infants, who were dangling in swings suspended from the ceiling, kicking their bare feet against the carpet. A male attendant was changing one on a padded table. He noticed the girls and pointed meaningfully to the large clock on the wall. Sophia opened the door a crack, and Claire could hear the gurgles and giggles as the infants “talked” to one another. She smiled. She had not thought of newchildren as being appealing, not at all. But there was a sweetness to these little ones, she had to admit. She could understand why new parents wanted ones they could play with.

“I’ll be right in,” Sophia was telling her coworker. “I’m giving a tour. “Or”—she turned to Claire—“we could stop here. There’s only one more group, the next to youngest. They’re not that interesting. Want to come in and play with these? You could feed one if you want.”

Claire hesitated. She didn’t want to seem oddly interested in a particular group. “You know,” she told Sophia, “I’d really like to peek at the last group, just so I can say I’ve seen them all. If you don’t mind?”

Sophia sighed. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she told the uniformed man, who had placed the newly changed infant back in a swing and was now taking small bowls of cereal from the warmer.

“Over here,” Sophia told Claire, and led her to the last room in the corridor.

“So these would be, let me think, Thirty-one to Forty?”

“Correct.” Sophia was clearly eager to get back to her own charges. “Next to newest.”

“May I go in?” Claire was looking through the observation window. Each small crib held an infant, and two attendants were propping warmed bottles on padded holders beside their heads so that they could suck.

“I guess.” Sophia opened the door and asked. “We have a visitor. Could you use a hand for this feed?”

A uniformed man smiled. “How about *two* hands? We can use all the help we can get!”

“I have to get back to work with my own group. But I’ll leave her here with you.”

“Thanks, Sophia. It’s been good to see you again.” Claire smiled. “Maybe we could get together for lunch or something?”

“Yes. Come back anytime. Best is when they’re napping, though.” Sophia gave a brief goodbye gesture and returned to her own assigned room.

Claire entered timidly and stood watching as the final bottles were distributed. “There,” the attendant said. “Everyone’s been served. Now we have to check from time to time and make sure they’re all properly placed. Of course they’ll yell if they lose hold of the nipple! Won’t you?” He glanced down with a smile at one of the infants who was industriously sucking at the milk. “And then one by one we pick the little guys up and pat their backs till they burp. Ever done that?”

Claire shook her head. Till they burp? She couldn’t even imagine it. “No.”

He chuckled. “Well, you can watch. Then, if you want to give it a try—”

He lifted one of the infants from its crib. Claire moved forward and saw the number. Forty. She glanced around to see if the numbers were in order. But the little beds were on wheels, and seemed to have been placed randomly. As she watched, the attendant took Forty to a rocking chair in the corner and sat down with the little one against his shoulder.

The other attendant, a young woman, leaned forward over a crib with a sniff, and said suddenly, “Uh-oh! Thirty-four needs changing!” She wrinkled her nose and pushed the crib over to the changing area. “You’ll have to finish your bottle after I clean you up, little girl!” she said with a chuckle, and lifted the infant to the table.

Claire noticed, then, that each small crib here was also tagged with a gender symbol. She made her way past the little beds, glancing in at the infants, some sucking serenely on their milk, others gulping lustily. Suddenly one in a crib marked *male* let out a shriek, then switched to a loud wail.

“I don’t need to ask who *that* is!” the man said, continuing to pat and stroke the back of the infant he held. “I recognize his voice!”

Claire looked at the number on the crib that contained the howling newchild. “It’s Thirty-six,” she told him.

“Of *course* it’s Thirty-six!” the man replied, laughing. “It’s *always* Thirty-six! Pick him up, would you? See if you can get him to stop screeching.”

Claire took a deep breath. She had never held an infant before. The man, watching her, sensed that. “He won’t break. They’re quite tough, actually. Just be sure to support his head.”

She leaned down. Her hands seemed to know what to do. They slid easily under him, and found the way to hold his neck and head. Gently Claire picked up her son.

Five

NOTHING CHANGED. CLAIRE'S life didn't change. She woke each day, showered, donned her uniform, and attached her nametag: CLAIRE. HATCHERY ASSISTANT. She went to the cafeteria, greeted her coworkers, ate the morning meal, and began her assigned tasks. The superiors at the Hatchery were pleased with her work.

But at the same time, everything was different. Her every thought now was on the newchild she had met only once, had held for a moment, whose light eyes she had gazed into briefly, whose curly hair had touched her chin for too short a time. Number Thirty-six.

"Have they chosen the name yet?" she had asked the young woman attendant, who was re-propping the bottle for the female one she had changed and returned to her crib.

"For this one? I don't think so. They don't tell us, anyway. We never know their names until they're assigned."

Each newchild was given to his assigned parents at the Ceremony that would take place in December. Their names, chosen by a committee, were announced then.

"I meant this one," Claire explained. She had taken an empty rocking chair, and moved back and forth now with Thirty-six, whose loud crying had subsided. He was looking up at Claire.

"Oh, *that* one. He might not even get a name at the next Ceremony. They're already talking about keeping him here another year. He's not doing well. They call it failure to thrive." The young woman shrugged.

"Actually, he does have a name lined up." The man returned the infant he'd been burping to the crib, re-propped her bottle, came to where Claire was, and looked down at Thirty-six. "Hey there, little guy," he said, in a singsong voice.

"He does? How do you know?" The young woman looked surprised.

The man took Thirty-six from Claire, who relinquished him reluctantly. "I've been concerned about him," he explained. He looked down and made a funny face, as if encouraging the unhappy infant to laugh. "I thought it might make him more responsive if I started using his name. So I sneaked into the office and took a look at the list."

“And?” his assistant asked.

“And what?”

“His name is—?”

The man laughed. “Not telling. I only use it in secret. If it’s overheard? Big trouble. So I’m being careful.” He jiggled the infant in his lap. “It’s a good name, though. Suits him.”

The woman sighed. “Well, it had better perk him up before December,” she said, “if he wants to get a family. And right now,” she added, looking at the wall clock, “it’s going to be naptime soon, and we haven’t even finished the feeds.”

They had forgotten Claire was there. She rose from the rocker. It was true; the time had passed quickly. “I have to get back,” she told them. “I wonder: Would it be all right if I visit again?”

They were both silent for a moment. She realized why. It was an odd request. Children volunteered at many different places; it was required. But after the Assignments, after childhood, people worked at their assigned jobs. They didn’t visit around, or try out other things. She tried to come up, quickly, with an explanation that seemed logical.

“I have a lot of free time,” Claire said. “It’s a slow time of year at the Hatchery. So I wandered over today to visit Sophia. You know Sophia; she works down the hall, with the next older newchildren?”

They nodded. “Twenty-one to Thirty,” the man said. “That’s Sophia’s group.”

“Yes. Anyway, she showed me around a bit. And I can see that you can use an extra pair of hands from time to time. So I’m just offering to help out. If you’d like me to, of course.” Claire was aware that she was talking very fast. She was nervous. But the pair didn’t seem to notice.

“You know,” the man said, “if you wanted to do it on a regular basis, make it official, I think you’d have to fill out some forms.”

The young woman agreed. “Get permission,” she added.

Claire’s heart sank. She could never do that, never fill out official forms. They would identify her immediately as the Birthmother who had been reassigned.

Thirty-six wiggled and wailed. The man carried him to his crib and propped his bottle, but the wailing continued. The man patted the thrashing legs in a vain attempt to soothe him. He looked over at Claire with a wry smile.

“But come on over when you have free time,” he said. “Just on a casual basis.”

“Maybe I will,” Claire said, keeping her voice light, as his had been, “if I have a few moments sometime.”

She turned and fled. Thirty-six continued to cry. She could still hear him as she left the building.

Now she thought of nothing else, of no one else.

Six

IT FELT VERY strange, to have this feeling—whatever this feeling was. Claire had never experienced it before, the yearning she had to be with the newchild, remembering his face—how the solemn light eyes had stared at her, the way his hair curved around at the top of his head and lifted into a curl there, the wrinkling of his forehead, and his quivering chin before he began to cry.

Each family unit was allotted two children, one of each gender, and she had been the younger. They had waited several years after receiving Peter before they had applied for their girl. So Claire had never known an infant or a small child well.

She asked her coworkers, trying to make it a casual question, at the evening meal. “Do any of you remember getting your sibling?”

“Sure,” Rolf said. “I was eight when we got my sister.”

“I was older,” Edith said. “My parents waited quite a long time before they applied for my brother. I think I was eleven.”

“I was the second child in my family,” Eric said. “Anyone want that last piece of bread?”

They all shook their heads, and Eric took the last slice from the serving plate. “My sister was only three when they got me. I think my mother actually liked little children.” He made a face, as if the idea mystified him.

“That’s what I was wondering about, actually,” Claire explained. “Is it, well, *usual* for people to become really fond of newchildren?”

“Depends what you mean by ‘fond,’” Dimitri said. The head of the entire Hatchery operation, Dimitri was an upper-level worker; he was older, and had studied science intensively. “But you know, of course, that infants of any species—”

He stopped and looked at the rest of them, at their blank expressions. “Didn’t you study this in evolutionary biology?” he asked.

Finally, at the silence, he chuckled. “All right, so you don’t know. I’ll explain. Infants are born with big wide-spaced eyes, generally, and large heads, because that makes them look appealing to the adults of the species. So it ensures that they will be fed and cared for. Because they look—”

“Cute?” Edith interrupted.

“Right. *Cute.* If they were born ugly, no one would want to pick them up, or smile at them, or talk to them. They wouldn’t get fed. They wouldn’t learn to smile or talk. They might not survive, if they didn’t appeal to the adults.”

“What do you mean by ‘any species’?” Eric asked.

“Well, we don’t have mammals anymore, because a healthy diet didn’t include mammal, and they detracted from the efficiency of the community. But in other areas there are wild creatures of all sorts. And even here, people once had things they called pets. Usually small things: dogs, or cats. It was the same in those species. The newborns were—well, cute. Big eyes, usually. Animals don’t smile, though. That’s a skill unique to humans.”

Claire was fascinated. “What did people do with ‘pets’?”

Dimitri shrugged. “Played with them, I think. And also, pets provided company for lonely people. We don’t have those now, of course.”

“Nobody’s lonely here,” Edith agreed.

Claire was quiet. She didn’t say this, but she was thinking: *I am. I am lonely.* Even as she thought it, though, she realized she didn’t really know what the term meant.

The first buzzer sounded, meaning time to finish up. They began to stack their trays. “Rolf? Edith?” Claire asked. “When you got your siblings—and they were infants, with big eyes, and big heads, and so they were *cute* . . .”

Both of her coworkers shrugged.

“I guess,” Edith said.

“Did you think about them all the time, and want to hold them and not ever leave them?”

They looked at Claire as if she had said something preposterous, or unintelligible. She hastened to rephrase her question. “Or maybe I meant your mothers. Did your mothers cuddle your siblings and rock them, and, well—”

“My mother *worked*, just like every other mother. She took very competent care of my sister, of course, and she took her to the Childcare Center every day,” Rolf said. “She wasn’t a cuddler, though. Not my mother.”

“Same with my mother and my brother,” Edith said. “My father and I helped her to take care of him, but both of my parents had very demanding

jobs. And I had school, of course, and then my training. We were all happy to drop him off every day at the Center.

"We took great pride in him, of course. He was a very intelligent infant," she added primly. "He's studying computer science now."

The final buzzer sounded, and they all rose to go back to work.

I must put Thirty-six out of my mind, Claire told herself.

But she found it impossible. Each day, at her microscope, examining the embryonic salmon for flaws in their structure, Claire looked at the large dark spots that were their primitive, unformed eyes. She imagined that they were gazing at her. It was clearly impossible. Those murky, glistening orbs were not capable of vision, not yet; and there was no intelligence within the quivering blob, nothing that craved affection or even attention. But she found herself reminded, again and again, of the pale, long-lashed eyes that had looked up at her briefly, and of the small fingers that had encircled her thumb.

She began to dream of Thirty-six. In one dream, she wore the leather mask again, but they handed her something to hold. It moved tentatively in her arms, and she clasped it tightly, knowing it was he, not wanting them to take him away, weeping behind the mask when they did.

In another, recurrent dream, Thirty-six was here with her, in her small room at the Hatchery, but no one knew. She kept him hidden in a drawer, and opened it from time to time. He would look up and smile at her. Secrecy was forbidden in the community, and the dream of the hidden newchild caused her to wake with a feeling of guilt and dread. But a stronger feeling was the one that stayed with her after that dream: the excitement of opening the drawer and seeing that he was still there, that he was safe and smiling.

As children, within the family unit, they had been required to tell their dreams each morning. For single, working members of the community, like those at the Hatchery, the requirement was set aside. Occasionally, at the morning meal, one of the workers would recount an amusing dream. But there was none of the discussion that had been part of the family ritual. And Claire kept her new dreams private.

But she felt restless now, and different, in ways that she didn't understand. In keeping with the demands of her new job and its meticulousness, its constant analyzing, she tried to examine her own

feelings. She had never done so before, had never needed to. For Claire's entire life, her feelings had been those of—what? She searched in her mind for the right descriptive word. *Contentment.* Yes, she had always been content. Everyone was, in the community. Their needs were tended to; there was nothing they lacked, nothing they . . . That was it, Claire realized. She had never *yearned* for anything before. But now, ever since the day of the birth, she felt a yearning constantly, desperately, to fill the emptiness inside her.

She wanted her child.

Time passed. It became mid-November. She was busy with her work. But finally she found a time to return to the Nurturing Center.

Seven

"HELLO AGAIN!" The man's greeting was cheerful and welcoming. "I thought you'd forgotten us!"

Claire smiled, pleased that he recognized her. "No. But it's a busy time at work. It's been hard to get away."

"Well," he agreed, "it's almost December. Lots going on."

"Especially here, I imagine." Claire gestured to indicate that she meant the entire Nurturing Center, not only this one room, where the lights were dimmed—it was just past the midday mealtime, and the newchildren were all napping. She and the man spoke in lowered voices. In the corner, his female assistant was quietly folding clean laundry that had just been delivered.

"Yes. We're getting them all ready. Apparently the assignments have all been made. I haven't seen the list yet."

A sudden thought struck Claire. "Do you have a spouse? Could you apply for a child, and then—I suppose this would be against the rules, but—could you choose the one that would be assigned to you?"

He laughed. "Too late for that. Yes, I have a spouse—she works over at Law and Justice. But we already have our complete family: boy first, then girl. And it was quite a while ago that we got them. I was just an assistant then. No clout."

"So you didn't even hint at which ones—?"

He shook his head. "Didn't matter. They match them pretty carefully. We've been very satisfied with ours."

A sound from one of the cribs caught his attention, and he turned. It grew louder: the fussy whimper of an infant. Claire could see a small arm flail.

"You want me to get him?" the assistant asked, looking over.

"No, I will. It's Thirty-six again. Of course!" His voice was resigned and affectionate.

"Could I?" Claire asked, surprising herself.

"Be my guest." The man made a joking gesture toward the crib. "He likes being talked to, and sometimes patting his back helps."

“Or not,” the woman in the corner interjected wryly, and the man laughed.

Claire lifted the restless newchild from his crib. “Walk him in the hall,” the man suggested, “so he doesn’t wake up the others.”

Holding him carefully, she carried the wriggly, whimpering bundle out of the room and walked back and forth in the long hallway, jiggling him against her shoulder so that he calmed slightly. He held his head up and looked around with wide eyes. She found herself talking to him, nonsense words and phrases, in a singsong voice. She nuzzled his neck and smelled his milky, powdered scent. He relaxed in her arms, finally, and dozed.

I could walk out of here, Claire thought. *I could leave right now. I could take him.*

Even as she had the thought, she could see the impossibility of it. She had no idea how to feed or care for an infant. No place to hide him, despite her tempting dream of the secret drawer in her room.

The man appeared in the doorway, smiled when he saw that the infant was asleep, and beckoned. “Good job,” he whispered when she approached.

They stood in the hallway together by a window that looked out across scattered dwellings and the agricultural fields beyond. Two boys rode past on bicycles, and the man waved, but the boys were talking eagerly together and didn’t notice. The man shrugged and chuckled. “My son,” he explained. She watched and could see the boys turn left where the path intersected another just past the Childcare Center. They were probably going to the recreation field.

“You’ve got just the right touch,” the man said, and Claire looked at him questioningly. He nodded toward the sleeping infant she was still holding.

“He hardly sleeps. Classic failure to thrive. So they’ve decided not to assign him to a family at the Ceremony. We’re going to keep him here another year, give him a chance to mature a bit. Some newchildren do take longer than others. Thirty-six has been very difficult.

“I take him back to my dwelling at night,” he explained. “The night crew here has been complaining about him. He keeps the others awake. So he spends nights with my family.”

He reached for the infant and Claire relinquished him reluctantly. As she passed him from her arms into the man’s, she felt something. She pushed the blanket aside and looked at a metal bracelet encircling one tiny ankle.

“What’s this?”

“Security. It would set off an alarm if he were removed from the building.”

Claire took a quick breath, recalling the thought she had had briefly: *I could take him.*

“All the newchildren wear them. I’m not sure why. Who would want one?” The man chuckled. “I’ll take his off when I take him with me at the end of the day.”

The infant slept on, and the man murmured to him quietly. “Good boy,” she could hear him say. “Coming home with me tonight? That’s a good, good boy.”

He turned away, still murmuring, and took the newchild back to his crib. Watching and listening, Claire thought she heard the nurturer whisper a name. But she couldn’t quite make out what it was. Abe? Was that it? It sounded, she thought, like Abe.

Eight

CLAIRE DIDN'T ATTEND the Ceremony. Almost everyone in the community did, every year. But each facility needed to leave someone in charge, and Claire had volunteered to stay at the Hatchery. The Birthmothers, the Vessels, were exempt, and so Claire had not attended the two previous years either; and now she found that she didn't have much interest in the two-day event anymore.

The Naming and Placement of Newchildren was always first on the program, so that the infants could be taken away and cared for during the remaining hours, and wouldn't be disruptive. Claire would have wanted desperately to attend the Ceremony if her own child, Abe (she was trying to think of him now by the name she had overheard) were to be given to a parental pair. But it would be another year for him, and she had little interest in watching the placements of the others.

Neither did she care much about the Matching of Spouses. Like Claire, most people found the Matching boring—important, of course, but with few surprises. When an adult member of the community applied for a spouse, the committee pondered for months, sometimes even *years*, making the selection, matching the characteristics—energy level, intelligence, industriousness, other traits—that would make two people compatible. The spouse pairs were announced each year at the Ceremony and shared a dwelling after that. Their pairing was watched and monitored for three years, after which they could apply for a child, if they wished. The Assignment of the Newchild, when they received one, was actually more exciting than the Matching.

Thinking about it as she wandered the halls of the empty lab, so quiet and unoccupied today, Claire found herself wondering, suddenly, if she would be able to apply for a spouse. As Birthmother, she had not been eligible. But now? Rolf, her coworker, had put in an application and was waiting. And so had Dimitri, she'd heard. Could she? She wasn't old enough yet. But when she was? She didn't know. The regulations for ordinary citizens were so clear, so well known, so carefully followed. But Claire's situation was unusual. And she had been given very little information when she was dismissed and transferred to the Hatchery. It

was as if they had lost interest in her. *They.* She wasn't even sure who *they* were. The Elders. The committees. The voices that made announcements over the speakers, like the message this morning: PLEASE GATHER AT THE AUDITORIUM FOR THE OPENING OF THE CEREMONY.

She glanced at the time. It was late morning now. The spouses would be paired, the newchildren named and assigned. Soon there would be a lunch break, with tables set up and lunch packets distributed, outside the Auditorium. Then they would reconvene for the beginning of the Advance in Age and the rituals of growing older.

The younger children were presented in groups: all the Sevens, for example, receiving their front-buttoned jackets; the Nines, brought to the stage and given their first bicycles to great applause. Haircuts for all the Tens, with the little girls losing their braids, and then the sweepers coming quickly to the stage to remove the shorn hair. But the Advance in Age Ceremonies usually moved quickly along, to applause—and some laughter as well, because every year someone burst into tears for one reason or another, or felt compelled to show off on the stage and did something foolish.

Claire had participated in those rituals throughout her childhood. She didn't mind missing them now.

The Ceremony of Twelve, which would begin on the second morning, was always the highlight. Here was when the unexpected could happen, as the children received their Life Assignments. It had always been fun, watching the Assignments given out. Until her own, of course.

Well. It was in the past. But she was happy not to be there today, in the audience, watching as other young girls heard that they too had been found fit only to breed.

It seemed odd, the silence with everyone gone for the day. There was not much, really, for her to do; she was simply required to be there, to be certain nothing went awry. But everything—the temperature in the labs, the humidity, even the lighting—was carefully calibrated and controlled. Claire checked the screen of her computer periodically for incoming Hatchery messages, but nothing was urgent.

She glanced through a window at the supply boat that was moored at the dock. It had arrived at a bad time. With the Ceremony taking place, they would have to wait two days before they could unload. Probably, she realized, they'd be happy to have some time free of work. She wondered

what the crew was doing on this unexpected vacation. She had watched them previously, and heard them, lifting and stacking and carrying and directing. Their clothes were different; they didn't wear the loose-fitting tunic of the community. And they spoke with a slight accent, an inflection that was unfamiliar.

Claire had never been curious about those from Elsewhere. It was part of the contentment she had always known. *Here* had always been enough.

Now, through the window, she stared at the heavy-laden moored boat and found herself wondering about its crew.

Nine

"THAT LUNCH WAS pretty awful, wasn't it?"

Eric entered the lobby of the Hatchery with the others at the end of the day. The group was noisy and laughing, obviously happy to be finished with the hours of ritual, sitting, paying attention, politely applauding.

"It wasn't so bad," one of the other workers replied. "Just wasn't enough of it! I'm still hungry."

Claire was seated at the receptionist's desk. "It's almost time for dinner," she told them. "How was the Ceremony?"

"Fine," someone said. "They got all the way through the Elevens, so there's only the Ceremony of Twelve left for tomorrow morning."

"Good. It went smoothly, then. No children misbehaved or had a tantrum," Claire said, laughing.

"Nope. No surprises at all," Edith told her.

"Except maybe for Dimitri," Eric announced.

"Dimitri?"

Everyone chuckled. "He thought he'd be assigned a spouse. He was on the edge of his seat. But they didn't call his name."

"Oops. That means he has another whole year to wait," Claire said.

"Or more!" Eric pointed out. "There have been people who waited *years* for matching."

"Well, it's for the best," Edith commented. "There probably wasn't a good match for him available this time."

A young man whose name Claire didn't know had been listening. "He only applied for a spouse because he wanted a dwelling," he said. "He's tired of living in the dorm." He turned, seeing Dimitri come through the door. "Even though he gets a special suite, for being director. Isn't that right, Dimitri? You're sick of the dorm, right?"

Dimitri crushed the program he was carrying into a wadded ball, and tossed it at the young man. "I'm sick of living with *you*, that's all!" He grinned, picked up the paper where it had fallen, and tossed it into the trash receptacle.

They hung their jackets on the row of pegs beside the front door. "Everything quiet here, Claire?" someone asked.

She nodded. “A couple of the boatmen came ashore and went for a walk. I saw them strolling along the river path.”

“Those guys are so odd,” Eric commented. “They never talk to anyone.”

“Maybe it’s against their rules,” Claire suggested.

“Could be. Elsewhere probably has completely different rules.”

“Actually, talking to them might be against *our* rules. Has anyone checked?” Edith asked.

Everyone groaned and most of them glanced at the large monitor on the receptionist’s desk.

It occurred to Claire that she could check on the rules and answer her own question about whether she could apply for a spouse. But did she care, really? Enough to make her way through the lengthy index and perhaps find her answer in a sub-subparagraph or footnote? Probably not, she thought.

The loud rasp of the buzzer summoned them all to the cafeteria for the evening meal. She rose and found her place in the line. From a window in the hallway, she noticed two members of the boat crew lounging on the deck of the vessel. It was heavily loaded with crates of cargo, and the two young men sat side by side, leaning against a sealed container. Each of them held a small cylinder to his mouth, and it appeared that they sucked smoke from it and then blew the smoke into the air. It was an odd custom that she had not seen before, and she wondered what its purpose was. Perhaps it was a medicinal inhaler of some sort.

The line moved forward. Conversations, laughter, and comments interrupted her thoughts. Claire approached the stack of trays, took hers from the top, and saw that Edith and Jeannette had saved a seat for her at their table. She moved ahead, holding her tray out to the serving person behind the counter, and put the boat crew out of her mind.

“What was the Naming of Newchildren like?” she asked them after she had sat down with her tray of food. “Were there any surprising names?”

“Not really,” Jeannette said, “except I was startled to hear that one, a boy, was given the name Paul. That was my father’s name.”

“But they can’t use the same name twice!” Edith said. “There are never two people in the community with the same name!”

“But they do *regive* names,” Claire pointed out, “after someone is gone.”

“Right. So that means my father is gone. I was surprised to hear it,” Jeannette said.

“When did you see him last?” Claire asked. She could remember her own parents, but it had been several years, and details about them had begun to fade.

Jeannette thought, and shrugged. “Probably five years. He worked in Food Production, and I never go over that way. I see the woman who was my mother now and then, though, because she’s in the landscaping crew. Not very long ago I noticed her trimming the bushes over at the edge of the recreation field. She waved when she saw me.”

“Nice,” Edith said, offhandedly. “You want the rest of that salad? Can I have it?” Jeannette nodded, and Edith reached for the half-empty plate that had been set to the side.

“Paul’s a handsome name,” Claire said, feeling a little sorry for Jeannette, though she didn’t know exactly why. “It’s nice when they reuse a good one. I remember back when I was a Ten, they named a newchild Wilhelmina, and everyone cheered, because everyone had been fond of the previous Wilhelmina before she entered the House of the Old. So when she was gone, it was nice to reuse her name.”

“I remember that. I was there,” Edith said.

“Me too,” Jeannette recalled. “Nobody cheered when they named the new Paul. But I think there was a feeling of satisfaction. People liked my father,” she said. “He was nice. Very quiet. But nice.”

They finished their meal in silence. Then, at the sound of the buzzer, they stacked their plates and began to tidy their table.

It was dusk. The others were tired after the long day of the Ceremony. Anticipating another day of it tomorrow, they had drifted off to their rooms early, after the evening meal. But Claire found herself restless after the day indoors. She decided to take a walk.

The path along the river was shaded and pleasant at this time of day. Ordinarily she would have encountered others walking, and exchanged greetings. But no one was out and about this evening; it had been a long day for them all. Claire wandered beside the water until she approached the huge bridge. It was forbidden to cross it without special permission, and she had no idea what lay beyond, on the other side. There was nothing visible but trees. It was simply Elsewhere. She had heard people say that

occasionally, though rarely, small groups were taken to visit other communities. But perhaps it was just a rumor. Claire herself had never known anyone who had seen Elsewhere.

Standing at the base of the massive concrete supports that formed the foundation for the bridge, Claire measured it with her eyes. The barge that was now moored by the Hatchery must have barely fit beneath.

If she crossed the intersecting road here, she would continue along the river path and pass the large barn that housed official vehicles. Citizens made their way around the community only by bicycle, but large deliveries were transported by trucks, and sometimes maintenance required heavy equipment. It was all stored here. Claire remembered a few years back, when she had been a Ten or a Nine, the boys who were her age-mates had all been fascinated by the vehicle barn. They had, almost all of them, yearned to be assigned a career involving transportation so that they could be trained to drive the equipment.

But it had never interested Claire, and it didn't this evening. She turned onto the main stretch of road and walked to the northwest, away from the river, with the central plaza spread out on her left. She passed the Auditorium, which stood at the end of the plaza; earlier in the day the community had gathered in throngs on its steps, and they would be there again in the morning. But now, at dusk, the plaza was empty and the large building that dominated its southwest border was quiet and seemed unoccupied.

She realized that she was walking toward the Nurturing Center. She could turn left there and continue on past the Infirmary and the Childcare Center, making a large loop that would take her back to the Hatchery.

"Hi there!"

The man's voice startled her. The entire community had been so still. But looking up, Claire saw the bicycle stopped at the corner of the plaza. She recognized the nurturer who had been so pleasant to her during her visits. She smiled, waved, and walked toward the corner where he waited, one foot on the ground, balancing his bike.

He put one finger to his lips as she approached. "Shhh." Then he gestured toward the back of his bicycle, where a carrying basket had been attached. As she came near, she could see that there was a sleeping infant in the basket. "Finally he's asleep," the man whispered. "I'm taking him home for the night."

Claire nodded and smiled down at Newchild Thirty-six.

"Were you at the Ceremony?" the man asked.

She shook her head. "I volunteered to stay at the Hatchery. I've been to enough Ceremonies." She kept her voice lowered, as he had.

The nurturer chuckled softly. "I know the feeling," he said. "But it was fun for me today. Part of my job is giving the newchildren to their parental units. The new mothers and fathers are always so excited.

"I'm glad we get to nurture this one for another year, though," he added, reaching to touch the edge of the basket. "He seems pretty special."

Claire nodded in agreement, not trusting herself to speak.

"Gotta go," the man said. He placed his right foot on the uptilted pedal of the bike. "Tomorrow's a big day for my family unit. Our son's a Twelve this year. Lots of nervousness and apprehension."

"Yes, I'm sure," Claire said.

"Come visit us again at the Center? We'll have a new batch of newborns arriving soon. And this guy will be there too, of course! His playmates will all be gone, to their new family units, so he'll enjoy visitors."

"I will." She smiled at him, and he set off again on his bike, toward the area of family dwellings. Claire stood there watching the little basket jiggle gently as the bicycle moved along the path. Then she turned away.

Ten

APPARENTLY THE CEREMONY of Twelve had concluded with a surprise. When the Hatchery workers returned at the end of the second day, they were murmuring about it.

The second day of the Ceremony was always a long day. New Twelves were called to the stage individually and their attributes described. It was the first time that the youngsters were singled out and attention paid to the accomplishments of their childhood. A boy might be praised for his scholarship, and the audience reminded of his special abilities in science. Or the Chief Elder might even call attention to an especially pretty face—it was always embarrassing when that happened, because in the community attractiveness was never considered an asset to be mentioned—and the Twelve thus described would blush, and the audience laugh. The community was always attentive and supportive; each adult had been through this experience and knew how important it was. But going one by one did make for a long time on the second day.

"The Chief Elder skipped one Twelve," Rolf explained to Claire at the evening meal. "She went from Eighteen to Twenty."

"We all cringed. We thought she'd made a mistake." Edith straightened and tensed, demonstrating with her posture how nervous she and the others had been.

"*Everybody* thought so. Did you hear the murmur go through the Auditorium?" someone asked.

"And the boy she skipped? Number Nineteen? I could see him from where I was sitting. He was completely nonplussed!" A young man at the end of the table grinned.

"So what happened?" Claire asked.

"Well," Rolf explained, "after she finished with the last one—"

"Number Fifty?"

"Yes. But of course she had only called up forty-nine to the stage. Then she apologized to the audience."

"The Chief Elder *apologized?*" It was hard to believe.

Rolf nodded. "She laughed a little. She could see we were all sort of nervous. So she reassured us, and apologized for making us

uncomfortable. Then she called the boy, number Nineteen, to the stage."

"He looked as if he was going to throw up," Eric said, laughing.

"I don't blame him," Claire said. She found herself feeling sorry for the boy. It must have been an awful moment for him. "What did she say to him?"

"That he hadn't been assigned—which we all knew, of course. But then—this was the surprise. She said he'd been 'selected.'"

"Selected for what?" Claire had never heard of such a thing before.

Rolf raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "I don't know."

"Didn't she say?"

"Yes, but I didn't understand what she was talking about. Did any of you?" He looked around at his coworkers at the table.

"Not really," Edith said. "It was important, though. It had to do with the Giver and the Receiver."

"Whoever *they* are," someone murmured.

"Yes, it sounded really important," Eric agreed.

"Do you think the boy understood?"

They all shook their heads. "He looked completely confused," Edith said. "I felt sorry for him."

The cleanup buzzer sounded. They began to gather their plates and forks. "Who was he?" Claire asked. She was still fascinated by the idea of the selected boy.

"Never heard of him before. But we all know his name now, don't we?" Eric said with a laugh.

"What do you mean?"

"The whole community called out his name. It was a kind of ceremonial . . . What would you call it? A *recognition.* We all shouted the name over and over. Jonas!"

Rolf, Edith, and some other workers joined in. "Jonas! Joooonas!"

People at all the other tables looked up. Some seemed amused, others a little worried. Then they too called the name. "JOOOONAS! JOOOONAS!"

The final buzzer sounded and they fell quiet. People looked around at each other in the sudden silence. Then they stood to leave the room. Dinner had ended.

Eleven

CLAIRE WALKED AGAIN along the river before retiring. Once more she was alone. Usually the workers took walks in pairs or groups, but again tonight the others were tired after the unusual day. One by one they had gone to their rooms, some of them carrying the readers that they were supposed to study in order to advance in their jobs. From time to time Claire turned her reader on and skimmed the material, but she had little interest in it. She had not been selected for this job by a committee that had perceived her fascination with fish. They had simply sent her here because they needed a place to put her after her failure as a Birthmother.

She had read the manual pages listlessly several times, guiltily aware of her own disinterest. She had memorized a phrase: *cleavage, epiboly, and organogenesis.* She could still say it but realized that she had completely forgotten what it referred to.

"Activation of cortical alveoli," Claire murmured, walking. That was another phrase, a heading she had memorized in the manual.

"What?" a nearby voice asked, startling her. She looked up.

It was one of the boat crew, a young man in shorts and a sweater. He wore dark laced shoes made from a kind of canvas, with thick, textured soles that Claire assumed prevented him from slipping on the wet deck of the vessel. She wasn't frightened. He was smiling and looked quite friendly, not at all anyone to be nervous about. But she had never spoken to any of the boatmen before, or they to her.

"Is that a different language?" he asked, grinning. He had the distinctive accent she had overheard.

"No," Claire answered politely. "We speak the same language."

"Then what is 'amplification of corsical alveoli'?"

Claire couldn't help laughing. He had gotten quite close to her words, but still he was amusingly wrong.

"I was just trying to memorize something for work," she explained. "A phase of embryonal development. It's a little boring, I'm afraid, unless you are fascinated by fish. I work at the Hatchery."

"Yes, I've seen you there."

"You've had to wait to unload because of our annual Ceremony."

He shrugged. “Not a problem. Nice to rest from the work. We’ll unload tomorrow and be on our way.”

He had begun to walk beside her and now they were approaching the bridge. They stopped there for a moment and watched the turbulent churning of the water.

“Do you ever worry that a bridge might be too low? Do you encounter other bridges? Might your boat be too tall for a low one?”

He chuckled. “Not my job to worry,” he said. “The captain has the charts and knows the routes. We’re six point three meters. Never bumped a bridge yet, or knocked a crew member into the drink.”

“We’re required to learn to swim but we’re not allowed in the river,” she found herself telling him.

“Required? Who requires it?”

Claire felt slightly flustered. “It’s just one of the rules of the community. We learn in a pool. When we’re five.”

The young man laughed. “No rules like that where I come from. I learned when my dad threw me into a pond. I was eight, I think. Swallowed half the pond before I made my way to the dock, and my dad laughing the whole time. I bawled when I got out and so he threw me back in.”

“Oh. Goodness.” Claire didn’t know quite what to say. She couldn’t imagine the scene. Her own swimming class had been orderly and precise, with special instructors. No heartless laughing men called *Dad.*

“After that I could swim. Wouldn’t want to try in this river, though.” He looked down at the fast-moving dark water, how it pounded against some rocks near the bank, then slid splashing over them, so that they disappeared briefly, then reemerged with foam sliding down their slick, mossy sides.

Some years before, a child named Caleb had fallen into the river near here and the entire community had performed the Ceremony of Loss. Claire remembered it: the shock, the hushed voices, and how parents had kept their children nearby afterward, and warned them, sternly, again and again. She thought she remembered hearing that the parents of the lost child, Caleb, had been chastised. It was the job of parental units to protect their children from harm. Caleb’s parents had not performed well.

Yet this boy’s father had thrown him into deep water, and laughed; and now he himself laughed at the memory. It seemed so strange.

They chatted. He asked about her job and they discussed fish aimlessly for a while. In a place far away—he gestured—he had seen some almost as large as the boat. She thought he might be joking, but he seemed serious. Could it be true? She wanted to ask him where his boat would go next. Where it came from; where *he* came from. It was Elsewhere, really, that she wondered about. But she felt uneasy. She was afraid that asking such questions might somehow be against the rules. Anyway, it was beginning to get dark, and she knew she must return. “I have to get back,” she said.

He turned with her and they walked toward the Hatchery buildings. “Would you like to see aboard?” he asked suddenly.

“I don’t think it’s allowed,” she told him apologetically.

“The captain wouldn’t mind. He often has visitors come aboard. We’re a sea-river vessel. Very unusual. People like to come aboard and look around.”

“Sea-river?”

“Yes. We don’t stay just to the river. We can go to sea as well. Most riverboats can’t.”

“Sea,” Claire said. She hadn’t the slightest idea what that meant.

He misunderstood her. “Yes, they want to see the galley, and the wheelhouse, all of it. Very curious. The captain is proud to show them around. Or a crew member can. We have a crew of ten.”

“I meant that *I’m* not allowed. I have to stay at my work, I’m afraid.”

They had reached the fork in the path that meant they would separate, he heading back along the river to his boat. She would turn here toward the Hatchery entrance.

“Too bad,” he said. “I would enjoy showing it to you. And you could meet Marie!”

“Marie?”

“She’s the cook on the boat.” He laughed. “That surprises some people, that we have a woman aboard.”

Claire was puzzled. “Why would people be surprised by that?”

“Boating is men’s work, mostly.”

“Oh.” Claire frowned. Men’s work? Women’s work? Here in the community, there was no such difference.

“Yes, I would have enjoyed meeting Marie, and seeing the inside of the boat,” Claire told him. “Maybe when you return. Perhaps our rules will change. Or I might apply for special permission.”

“Good night, then,” he said, and turned toward the boat path.

Claire waved and stood watching as he disappeared beyond the overhanging bushes. Then she turned away. “Sea,” she repeated to herself, wondering what it might mean. *Sea.*

Twelve

THE WEEKS PASSED. Except for the secret she carried always with her, the secret of the baby, each day was much like the one before, and the one after. It had always been so, Claire realized. There had been no surprises in her life, or in anyone's within the community. Just the Assignment Ceremony, at Twelve: the disappointing surprise, then, of being named Birthmother. And later, of course, the shock of her failure.

But now it was again the dull routine of daily life in the community. The rasping voice through the speaker, making announcements, giving reminders. The rituals and rules. The mealtimes, and the work. Always the work. Claire had been given increasingly more demanding tasks in the lab, but they were still tedious and repetitious. She performed the work well but often found herself restless and bored.

What was it she had been told about this year's Ceremony? A boy had been singled out. It wasn't clear why, and no mention had been made of it again. Perhaps that boy—she remembered that his name was Jonas—was doing something different, and interesting. But she couldn't imagine what it might be.

She had visited the Nurturing Center again but been turned away. After all the newchildren had been assigned parental units at the Ceremony, the Center was almost empty. Newborns were beginning to arrive to start the year's population. But when Claire stopped by, though she was greeted pleasantly by the receptionist, she was told that they had no need for extra help until the numbers increased.

"It's actually vacation time for nurturers," the young woman explained. "Most of them are volunteering at other places while we wait for more infants." She peered at her computer screen. "We have two arriving next week."

She smiled at Claire. "Right now?" she said. "No need for help. But thanks for stopping by. Maybe in a couple of months."

Claire wanted to ask, *But what about Thirty-six? He's still here, isn't he? He wasn't assigned, remember? You're keeping him another year. He needs someone to play with him, doesn't he? Couldn't I be the one?*

But of course she said nothing. It was clear that the receptionist, however polite, was disinterested and wished Claire would leave. Reluctantly she turned away and left the building.

From time to time, though, she saw the man who worked there, the one who had had a special fondness for Thirty-six. She waved one afternoon when, out for a walk after lunch, she saw him across the Central Plaza, on his bicycle. He was apparently out on an errand; there was a package in his front basket. He smiled and waved back in reply. She noticed that his bicycle now had a child seat on the rear, replacing the carrying basket that had once held Thirty-six. The little seat was empty, but the fact that it was there gave Claire hope. It seemed that perhaps the nurturer was still taking him home at night. And he would be sitting up now. Claire pictured his sturdy little body and how he would grin in delight to feel the fresh air and see the trees.

She began to time her walks, carefully finishing in the lab and cleaning up there so that she could leave work and stroll during shift-change time. She walked to the part of the community that seemed most likely: the northeast corner of the Central Plaza, where the Nurturing Center stood and then the dwellings began, across the main boulevard. She had hopes of seeing the nurturer heading back to his dwelling for the evening meal, with little Abe riding behind him.

Finally her timing was right. There they were.

“Hello there!” Claire called.

The man looked up, recognized her, and eased his bicycle to a standstill, balancing it with his right foot on the path. “How are you?” he asked cheerfully. “It’s Claire, isn’t it?”

She was pleased that he remembered her name. She wasn’t wearing her nametag—it was still pinned to the lab coat she had hung up when she left work. And it had been three months now since they had seen each other.

“Yes, that’s right. Claire.”

“Nice to see you. It’s been a while.”

“I stopped by but they said they didn’t need me to help out because the newchildren had all been assigned.”

He nodded. “All but this one!”

Claire hadn’t wanted to look directly at Abe. Not at first. But now, since he had mentioned the infant in the child seat, she turned her attention there and smiled at the child, who was busily examining a leaf in his hands. He

must have pulled it from a bush as they rode past. She watched as he held the leaf to his own mouth and tasted it with a puzzled, uncertain look. She could see that he had two teeth.

"You're still taking him to your dwelling at night?"

The nurturer nodded. "He still doesn't sleep well. It annoys the night workers at the Center, especially now that they have some newborns to tend.

"But my family unit enjoys him. My daughter—her name is Lily—tried to convince me that we should apply for what they call a variance."

"A variance? What's that?"

"An exception to a rule. Lily thought we should try to convince them that *three* children would be appropriate for our family."

"And did you apply?" Claire asked.

He laughed. "Nope. My spouse would have applied for an annulment of our pairing if I had! This guy will be assigned to his own family next time around. He'll be fine. But in the meantime, it's fun having him at our dwelling nights." He turned to look behind him at the baby. "Oh, great," he groaned. "Eating a leaf. Well, I've been trained to sponge away spit-up. Part of the job!"

Claire could see that he was beginning to shift his balance and move his right foot toward the bike pedal. "Are you allowed to use his name in public now?" she asked quickly, trying to keep them there for another minute or so. "I remember that you were using it secretly."

The man hesitated. "Actually," he said a little guiltily, "we do use it at home. But we're not supposed to. He's still just Thirty-six until he's assigned.

"So I'm afraid I can't tell you what it is. But it's a good one."

"I'm sure it is. They always choose carefully, don't they? I like your daughter's name. Lily. It's pretty."

He smiled. "I have to be off. He's happy now, with that leaf to chew. But wait till he wants real food. He'll start yowling. And it's almost mealtime."

"It was nice to see you," she told him.

"You too. I'll tell my daughter that you think her name is pretty. She'll love hearing that." He rolled his eyes, as if it were too silly for words. "And of course, just to be fair and equal, I have to tell you that my son has a nice name as well."

Claire laughed. “I’m sure he does.”

The nurturer started off slowly on the bicycle. Behind him, strapped into the little seat, his mouth speckled with leaf fragments, the infant looked back and grinned at Claire.

“It’s Jonas,” the man called, referring to his son, and pedaled away toward the group of dwellings where he lived.

Thirteen

SHE ARRANGED HER days so that she would see them often, the man and the infant on the back of his bicycle. She became accustomed to the times, morning and evening, when the two of them made the short journey to and from the Nurturing Center, and she took walks then, after breakfast and before the evening meal. Often she encountered them, and usually the man stopped to chat, though sometimes he was rushed and had to hurry on. Little Abe (though she carefully referred to him as Thirty-six) knew her now, and grinned when he saw her. The man had taught him to wave his small hand when she said "Bye-bye" and they rode on. It became something to look forward to, a pleasant interruption to the long hours of lab work, which held little interest for Claire.

He imitated her. She poked her own tongue into her cheek, making a bump. He stared at it, then pushed his own small tongue into his own cheek. She wrinkled her nose. So did he. Then she did the two things together, her tongue into her cheek, her nose scrunched; solemnly he did the same, and they both began to laugh.

He was growing. Though he was technically now simply a One—every newchild born his year had become a One at the Ceremony—she calculated the months from the day of his birth. It had been, now, ten months.

"He's trying to walk," the nurturer told her one morning.

"He's strong," she said, gazing at the sturdy small legs dangling from the child seat on the back of the bike.

"Yes. We hold his hands and he takes steps. One day soon he'll be on his own. My spouse will have to put things high up on the counters. He grabs at everything."

"You have to be careful," Claire said, almost talking to herself, thinking about how difficult it must be to care for an infant.

"Of course that was part of my training," the nurturer explained reassuringly. "And I've taught my spouse and children.

"Hey!" he said suddenly, laughing. He turned. The newchild was tugging at his uniform. "Don't mess me all up! This was just delivered from the laundry!"

He turned to Claire. “Could you reach into that carrying case and get his hippo?” He pointed to a zippered case behind the child seat.

“His what?” Claire pulled the zipper open.

“His comfort object. It’s called hippo.”

“Oh.” She reached in and took out the stuffed toy. All small children had comfort objects. They came in various shapes. Hers, she remembered, had been called badger.

The newchild’s eyes lit up when he saw it. “Po,” he said, and reached for the toy. Claire handed it to him; he hugged it with a satisfied sigh and began to chew on one of its small ears.

“I think they might be ready to have you stop by and help again,” the nurturer suggested. “We have a batch of new ones.

“And the little ones take my time,” he added. “You could come play with Thirty-six and keep him out of mischief.”

“I will.” She waved when they rode on, and called “Bye-bye,” but the newchild was preoccupied with his hippo and didn’t even hear her.

She saw Marie for the first time. The cargo boat had come and gone now three times since the day she had met and talked to its crew member. Each month it arrived and remained at dock only a day, long enough for the unloading. She recognized the boy she had walked with once, and waved when she saw him on the deck. He waved back. Claire almost felt that if he repeated his invitation for a tour, she would say yes, though she would ask permission first, she decided. She would check with the Hatchery director.

But they came and went so quickly that the boy (odd, she thought of him as her friend though in truth they had shared only one brief conversation) did not come ashore.

And now they were moored again, but she didn’t see him. Other crew members scrambled about, tending lines, lifting crates, but the dark-haired boy wasn’t there. Claire glanced over at the activity on the boat through the windows of the lab from time to time, and it became clear that he was no longer part of the crew.

She mentioned it to her coworker, Heather, phrasing it carefully. “There used to be a dark-haired boy who worked on the boat, but—”

“Lots of dark-haired boys. Look. There are three right there, piling those crates.”

Heather was correct. Three muscular young men were lifting and straightening some heavy boxes. Each had dark hair.

"Yes, but I meant a different one, one who used to wave to me. He and I talked once."

Heather shrugged. "They come and go. Different ones almost every time. Some stay awhile, others not so much. It's not like here, where we get assigned. I think they can decide about their jobs. If it gets boring, they leave. Or maybe something better comes along."

"Look! Who's that?" Claire pointed. A heavy woman had come from the interior of the boat and stood on the deck, watching the crew at work. She wore a stained apron stretched across her wide middle and tied in back. Her light hair was pulled back into a knot, but it was unruly, and as the girls watched, the woman smoothed and retied it. Then she lowered herself and sat on a thick pile of rope, leaning back against the cabin wall, and took a few deep breaths.

"Mind your feet, Marie!" a crew member called as he passed her on the deck, guiding a thick package that swayed in a net as the winch moved it up and outward.

"Mind your own feet," she called back with a hearty laugh. But she moved her legs aside so that he could get by.

"The boy told me there was a woman aboard," Claire said. "I'd forgotten her name. But now I remember it's Marie. She's the cook."

"Cook?" Heather looked puzzled.

Claire shrugged. "Well, they can't have their meals delivered the way we do. Not when they're on the river." *Or the sea*, she added in her mind. "So I guess Marie prepares the food."

"Her apron has its share of it," Heather said, referring to the darkened, spattered patches on the cloth, and she and Claire both laughed. Their own uniforms were spotless. Their clothing was collected every morning, laundered meticulously, and delivered each evening.

"Would you go aboard, if they invited you?" Claire asked Heather. "Just for a tour?"

"You mean like when people come to visit the Hatchery and we show them around?"

Claire nodded. Often small school groups came to visit and were given a little lesson on the life cycle of fish.

“I might, if it’s allowed,” Heather said with a shrug. “But I’m not really that interested in boats.”

They watched as Marie rose heavily from where she had been relaxing, reentered the cabin, and disappeared into the dark interior. Claire found herself wondering what it looked like in there. Where did Marie sleep? And how did it feel to be on the river, to stop at other communities? Did people everywhere look the same? The boy she had met wore strange-looking shoes and unfamiliar clothing. He had a different speech inflection, she recalled. And the different hairstyles on the boys was startling; some had almost clean-shaven heads; others, long hair tied back like a girl’s. Here in the community, each age had a prescribed hairstyle. But no boy ever had long hair.

Marie, with her oddly light hair, was startling in other ways. She was large, especially broad across her hips, and with a double chin. No one in the community looked like that. They were all of the same proportions. Their food delivery was calibrated to their size. Claire remembered a time some years ago when the weekly report showed that her mother’s weight had risen slightly. Her mother had been a little embarrassed, and perhaps annoyed, when the next meal deliveries included special weight-loss meals designated for her. She had eaten them, of course—it was required, and there were no alternatives—until the report showed that her size was under control once again.

“We’d better get back to work,” Heather murmured. She turned from the window.

“I’m just going out for a minute. I want to check the temperature in the lower holding pond.” Claire could see Heather frown suspiciously.

“Well,” Heather said after a moment, “mind your feet. It’s muddy by the pond.”

“Mind your own feet,” Claire replied with a laugh as she left the room.

She had no intention of going aboard, even if they asked her. But the lower pond was quite close to the river. The boat almost grazed the bank there, and she felt a yearning to go close to it. Odd, she thought, but she felt almost *lured* by the boat, in the same way that she found herself drawn to the Nurturing Center and the newchild who had been wrested from her body almost a year before. There was no relationship between the two, but Claire was feeling increasingly connected to both.

Standing beside the pond's edge, she looked up at the vessel's smooth side toward the low railing that edged the deck. The huge crates were all stacked now, and tightly roped in. There were places, near the cargo, where there was no railing. How easy it would be to slip on the wet deck and fall into the river below! *Mind your feet.* She remembered the young man's shoes with their ridged soles. Boat shoes, she had guessed, made specially for the wet deck.

Claire was still standing there when the boat's engine made a sudden low sound. In a moment it was a steady hum and she could see a spurt of dark smoke from a small stack. Some voices called, and she saw a crew member pull loops of rope loose from the moorings. He tossed them to another young man on the deck, and then jumped across and steadied himself as the boat slid away toward the center of the river.

From the building nearby she heard the buzzer that announced the midday meal. She turned and walked back toward the Hatchery as behind her the cargo boat moved with increasing speed toward the bridge and beyond. Behind it, at its broad stern, foam burst; then the river closed around the interruption and resumed its own form again, as if the boat had never been there.

Claire sighed. Returning to her ordinary life seemed so unappealing. She would go tomorrow, she decided, to visit little Abe.

Fourteen

ON THE TWELVE-MONTH anniversary of the day he had been born to her, Claire taught him to say her name. He had been officially a One since the previous ceremony, but now, Claire thought secretly, he is truly one year old.

The nurturer chuckled when he watched the newchild toddle over to her, calling, “Claire!” with a grin. “He’s a bright boy,” he said. “I just wish we could get his sleeping-pattern behavior squared away. If he’s not ready to be placed with a family unit by the time of the next Ceremony, well . . .”

“What?” Claire asked when his voice drifted away without completing the thought.

“To be honest, I don’t know. They can’t give him to parents if he doesn’t sleep. It would interrupt their work habits to be kept awake at night. But we can’t keep him here indefinitely.”

“Not even if he goes home with you at night? He’s fine here in the daytime. He hardly ever cries. Look at him!” Together they gazed at Thirty-six, who was seated on the floor, busily arranging wooden blocks in a stack. Feeling their gaze, he looked over. Impishly, he wrinkled his nose and thrust his tongue into his cheek, making the funny face that Claire had taught him. She made the same skewed face in reply and they both laughed.

“I can’t keep taking him home forever. My spouse is already somewhat annoyed about it. The children enjoy him, though. He’s been sleeping in my son’s room. He seems to do well there. But . . .”

Again he failed to finish his thought. The nurturer shrugged and went to the other section of the room where younger infants needed attention.

“I wonder if I . . .” Claire murmured, then fell silent. Of course she couldn’t. Unmatched people weren’t given newchildren. Even if it were possible, how could she care for him? It was enough to contemplate (and she had) how she could manage a small infant. But now, so well acquainted with this growing, active twelve-month-old boy, she could see clearly that they required more, not less, care as they grew. He had to be watched constantly. Taught language. Fed carefully. Bathed and dressed and . . .

She turned away, feeling tears well in her eyes. What on earth was the matter with her? No one else seemed to feel this kind of passionate attachment to other humans. Not to a newchild, not to a spouse, or a coworker, or friend. She had not felt it toward her own parents or brother. But now, toward this wobbly, drooling toddler—

"Bye-bye," she whispered to him, and he looked up at her and wiggled his fingers. It never distressed him when she left. He knew she'd be back.

But Claire choked back tears as she pedaled her bike back to the Hatchery. More and more she despised her life: the dull routine of the job, the mindless conversation with her coworkers, the endless repetition of her days. She wanted only to be with the child, to feel the warm softness of his neck as he curled against her, to whisper to him and to sense how he listened happily to her voice. It was not right to have these feelings, which were growing stronger as the weeks passed. Not normal. Not permitted. She knew that. But she did not know how to make them go away.

From time to time she saw the nurturer's son. *Jonas,* she remembered. Months before she had seen his father wave to him one afternoon when he rode by with a friend, the two of them on their way apparently to the recreation field. The two boys had seemed carefree, calling to each other, racing their bicycles along the path.

He seemed different now, to Claire. She saw him one evening walking along the river, alone, deep in thought. Although he didn't know her, and there would have been no real reason beyond politeness for a greeting, it was nonetheless customary for citizens to acknowledge one another with a nod or smile. But Jonas had not looked up as she passed him. It was not an intentional snub, she realized. It was that his mind was somewhere else. He seemed somehow troubled, she thought, and that was rare in a youngster.

She recalled that he had been singled out in some way at last year's Ceremony. Her coworkers, in describing it, had chanted his name—*Jonas, Jonas*—as apparently the audience had. But they had not really known what his . . . What had they called it? Selection, that was it—what his selection had meant.

But his father, the nurturer, spoke of him warmly and without hesitation. *He's been sleeping in my son's room,* he had said cheerfully of Thirty-six. So perhaps she had simply happened on the boy at an unusual moment,

when he had something on his mind, probably a school assignment. Claire could remember how troubling her own homework had been at times.

She saw him several more times, always on his bicycle, alone, after school hours. He was a Twelve now, and all Twelves would be working hard this year on the preparation related to their Assignments. Usually after school they would separate from their age-mates and go to the studies required for their future jobs. Sophia had been required to take infant-care classes, she recalled; and in fact Sophia had told her that even now, several years after their Ceremony year, the scholarly Marcus was still studying engineering. One girl in her group had taken up the study of law, as Claire's brother had six years earlier, and still went each day after school to the hall of Law and Justice for training.

One afternoon she found herself watching Jonas as he rode his bicycle away from the school building, which she could see from the front of the Hatchery. He turned left at the end of the educational buildings and seemed to be heading toward the House of the Old. So perhaps, she thought, that was his Assignment: the care of the elderly. But what was so special about that? What would make an entire audience rise to their feet and chant his name?

Later, one day while walking, she continued past the House of the Old, turned down a path, and discovered a very small structure attached at the rear of the building. It had a door, a few windows, and nothing else. Most buildings had an informational plaque explaining the purpose of the structure. HATCHERY LABORATORY. NURTURING CENTER. BICYCLE REPAIR. But this undistinguished rectangle had only an unobtrusive, meaningless label on the door. ANNEX.

Claire had never heard of the Annex. She had no idea what could be housed inside. But she had a feeling that this was where the boy Jonas was spending his training time. She wondered vaguely if what was happening in there was causing him to become so oddly solemn and solitary.

What could Jonas have been selected for?

Fifteen

CLAIRE LOOKED AROUND suddenly at her coworkers during the morning meal. Ever since her arrival at the Hatchery over a year earlier, she had felt different from them. They didn't seem to notice. They were friendly enough, and included her in their outings. Everyone was fond of the director, Dimitri, who never allowed his position of authority to make him arrogant. They were able to tease him about his long wait for a spouse.

But those who were young, as Claire was, shared small jokes, sometimes slightly derisive of the older workers, how methodical and orderly they were, how dutifully they went home each evening to their spouses and family units.

Of course they were all diligent workers as well; but youth was a time when a certain amount of lightheartedness was tolerated. Standing on the edge of the holding ponds, they gave the young fish silly names, and invented personalities for them. "Look at Greedy Gus! He's grabbing all the food again!" "Watch out! Here comes Big-Lips Buster!"

Claire always smiled at the foolishness. The Vessels, during her time at the Birthing Unit, had done the same thing: found things to joke about, ways to pass the time. She had joined in. She had been part of it, and of them, until the end.

But here she had always felt separate. Different. It was hard to identify why.

But today, at breakfast, she suddenly noticed something that she had taken for granted until now. As they cleared their plates, tossed their crumpled napkins into the waste container, and smoothed their uniforms in preparation for another day of work, each worker did one other routine, quick thing.

They each took a pill.

Claire knew about the pills. The pill-taking in the community began at about Twelve—or for some children, earlier. Parents observed their children and decided when the time had come. She herself had not been deemed ready for the pills before her Ceremony of Twelve. It hadn't mattered to her. Those of her friends who took them found it a nuisance.

But when she was selected Birthmother at the Ceremony, part of her list of instructions had specified: *No pills.*

If you are already taking the pills, stop immediately.

If you have not yet begun, do not begin.

She remembered now that the pill prohibition had seemed unimportant at the time. Her parents, though, were a little flustered by it. They took the pills. So did her brother, Peter. “I had them here ready for you when the time came,” Claire’s mother had said with a nervous laugh. “I suppose I’ll just throw them away.”

“Better turn them in,” her father had suggested.

She had asked the other Vessels when she had taken up residence at the Birthing Unit. “Were you already taking the pills?” Claire inquired at mealtime one evening.

Some had shrugged and said no. But several nodded. “I stopped right away when I got my instructions,” one girl said.

“I sort of tapered off,” another girl explained.

“I think it’s because we got switched over to vitamins,” Nadia had said. She was referring to the carefully measured dosages of vitamins that all the Vessels dutifully took each morning. “The pills were probably just a different vitamin that we don’t need anymore.”

“No. The pill was something else entirely,” Suzanne insisted. She was the one who said she had tapered off.

“She’s right,” Miriam said. “The vitamins don’t make us feel any different. But the pill—” She hesitated. “Well, *taking* it didn’t seem to have any effect. But when I *stopped* taking it, I began to feel . . .” But she couldn’t seem to describe what she meant.

“I felt restless,” Suzanne explained. “And—well, this is a little embarrassing. I don’t even know how to describe it. But I began to be aware of my own feelings. Not just in my head, but—well, *physical* feelings too.” She blushed, and chuckled nervously. The other girls, including Claire, felt embarrassed too, but intrigued. Feelings of any sort were not ordinarily discussed.

“Yes, that’s it,” Miriam agreed, “and you know what? I think they want us to undergo that change. Without the pills, our body gets ready. That’s what we’re experiencing.”

“I kind of like it. I never really wanted anything before. But now I want the Product. When I feel it growing, it makes me happy.” She rubbed her

belly and smiled.

The other girls agreed, touching their own distended middles. “It’s a nice feeling.”

“After you give birth, you take the pills again, until you’re ready for the next time,” Nancy had said. She had produced three Products by then and was waiting for her post-Birthmother Assignment.

“How long? This is my first time,” Claire had asked. “I never had the pills at all.”

“You will, though. After you produce, you’ll take the pills. Maybe six months. Then you stop, and you get ready for your next Product. See Karen over there?” She pointed to a young woman at a nearby table. “She just produced. She’s on the pills now. But in a few months she’ll need to start getting ready for her second production.”

“It’s really boring,” Suzanne said in a whisper. “When you’re between births, and taking the pills. *Nothing* is much fun. You don’t really notice it, though.”

Now, looking around in the Hatchery cafeteria, Claire was aware that all the other workers took a pill every morning. And that was why, she realized, their conversation was always lighthearted, superficial, essentially meaningless. They were like the Vessels in the pill-taking time between births—without feeling. She was the only one, she could see now, who did not take a pill each day—and she guessed that it was simply a mistake. Her disastrous birth experience, and her decertification, had been so sudden and startling that no one at the Birthing Unit had thought to supply her with pills or instruct her to take them. Perhaps each attendant had thought that someone else had done so.

And so she was the one who *felt* things. The only one! It was why she yearned for the child, and felt her heart melt each time his little hand waved and he said “Bye-bye” to her, calling out her name in his silvery voice, smiling that amazing smile.

She would not let them take that from her, that feeling. If someone in authority noticed the error, if they delivered a supply of pills to her, she thought defiantly, she would pretend. She would cheat. But she would never, under any circumstances, stifle the feelings she had discovered. She would die, Claire realized, before she would give up the love she felt for her son.

Sixteen

THE SUPPLY BOAT was once again moored by the Hatchery. Its ropes had been looped over the posts and its slanted gangplank slid ashore. Recalling the delay they had suffered a year ago, this time they had arrived early and would be leaving before the coming two-day event prevented their departure.

The time of the Ceremony was fast approaching. Had it really been that long? Had she been here at the Hatchery for well over a year? It was hard to believe. But when she thought of the child, of little Abe, she was aware of how he had developed from an infant wailing for a bottle when she first encountered him into a giggly toddler who could say her name, wave bye-bye, and imitate the funny face they now made to each other as a greeting that made them both laugh.

Hearing her coworkers mention the upcoming Ceremony reminded her that Abe would be assigned this time. He would move to a dwelling, have a set of parents and perhaps an older sibling. She would have to find a new way of continuing their relationship. Of course his new female parent—Claire could not make herself think *mother*—would have a job in the community as all women did. So the child would go to the Childcare Center each day.

Claire had done volunteer work there when she was young and fulfilling her required hours. She had enjoyed that time and knew that Abe would be well cared for there. He would be given educational toys, fed a balanced diet fortified with vitamins, taken for walks in the big multichild stroller, and introduced to basic discipline: the meaning of *no* and *don't;* how he must not suck his thumb, though he would be permitted to stroke his comfort object if he needed soothing. He would be tucked into a crib at naptime, when the big room's lights were dimmed.

Thinking of the naptime ritual, Claire felt a little concerned. Abe still was not a good sleeper. Most toddlers in the Childcare Center responded to firm discipline and learned quickly to be silent when the lights were dimmed. She remembered the rows of cribs with most of the little occupants sound asleep, and those who were wakeful staring quietly at the ceiling. The small children had names by then, and she recalled walking

along the row and reading LIAM, SVETLANA, BARBARA, HENRIK, on the identifying cards. Soon, after the upcoming Ceremony, he would be officially Abe. She desperately hoped that the crib with his name on it would not contain a wailing, sleepless little boy who would toss his hippo to the floor and thump his feet rhythmically against the mattress. Shrieking and kicking, sometimes holding his breath until his face turned frighteningly dark, was what he was still doing at the Nurturing Center at naptime. Whatever would they do with such a child when he entered the childcare system? Failure to thrive, they wrote on his chart when he was very young. Now? Failure to adjust? She shuddered. There were very severe consequences in the community for a citizen who couldn't adjust. Surely they would be more lenient with a very small boy, Claire thought. But she wasn't certain. It made her nervous to think about it.

She rode over to visit one afternoon two days before the Ceremony and could see the cleanup crews working hard outside the Auditorium, obviously preparing for the one time each year when the entire community gathered. Claire would attend this year. Already they had assigned a different worker to remain at the Hatchery. It was important to her to see Abe assigned, to know where he would be next. Maybe, since the assignments were so close, she could sneak a look at the paperwork; sometimes there was a clipboard on the nurturer's desk. Perhaps the information was there.

But when Claire arrived at the Nurturing Center, she could feel immediately that something was wrong. Of course, she thought, they are all very busy because of the Ceremony plans. They have to prepare these children, all fifty, for new families. A letter would have to accompany each newchild, a letter with instructions for the parental unit: feeding information, schedules, discipline reminders, health data, and observations about personality. Of *course* the staff was preoccupied and distracted. It accounted, Claire thought, for the heightened tension she felt. The nurturer who had always been so pleasant to her, the one with a son named Jonas who took Abe to his dwelling at night, was oddly abrupt when she greeted him. He seemed angry. She could hear a muttered argument taking place in a corner. No one smiled at her.

Even more distressingly, when she went to pick up Abe, who was playing with a wooden toy on the floor, someone snatched him away.

“Not a good idea to play with this one,” a uniformed female worker said. “There’s one over there: that girl? She needs to be changed. You could do that if you want to be helpful.”

The woman stalked off, holding Abe. She plopped him into an empty crib and he began to howl immediately. Everyone ignored him.

“I could maybe quiet him down,” Claire suggested, “and you’d be able to get your work done more easily.”

“Leave him,” the woman commanded her.

Claire looked questioningly at the nurturer whom she had begun to think of as a friend. She realized, suddenly, that in all these months she had never asked his name. But clearly now was not the time. His face was set in hard lines, and he looked away.

“But I—”

“I said: *leave him,*” the woman repeated impatiently.

Claire wanted to argue, perceived that she must not, and fell silent. Dutifully she picked up the baby girl they had indicated and took her to the changing table. In the background, Abe screamed and kicked at the bars of the crib. No one moved toward him.

Claire cleaned and diapered the cheerful female and set her back down with her toys on the floor. Other babies crawled and played nonchalantly, as if they were accustomed to the shrieking boy in the crib. At the desk, the nurturer whose name she had never thought to learn, the one who (Claire *knew*) cared about Abe, suddenly slammed shut the reader/writer device he’d been working on. He stood. He looked at the clock on the wall.

“I’m leaving early,” he said.

“Excuse me?” The uniformed woman looked up. She seemed to have some authority.

“I have a headache,” the nurturer said.

The woman glanced at the communication system on the wall. “You can call for medication,” she pointed out.

The nurturer ignored her. He went over to the crib and picked up Abe, who was clutching his comfort object and still shuddering with sobs, though his shrieking had subsided. “I’ll take him with me now. You know he spends the nights in my dwelling.”

“No need,” she said sharply. “He might as well stay here tonight. What’s the point?”

“The point is that my family is fond of him, and I would like to have him with us this evening.” He was speaking firmly to her, and Claire could see that she was trying to decide whether to argue. When she turned back to the papers in her hands, it was clear that she had decided against any confrontation.

“Return him early tomorrow,” she said. It sounded like an order.

“I will.” He walked toward the door, the toddler in his arms, and then spoke to Claire. “Do you have your bike? Why don’t you ride partway with us? You can turn off to the Hatchery at the main road.”

Confused, Claire nodded to the woman, who ignored her, and followed the man and Abe. She waited to watch him pack the hippo into the carrying case, then strap the child into the bike seat, then mounted her own bicycle and rode beside him on the path. He didn’t speak. The baby glanced at her, smiling now. She lifted one hand from the handle grip, waved to him, and watched him wave back. Both bikes slowed at the intersection where Claire would turn to the right. They stopped.

“Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said uncertainly. “I know you have a lot of work because of the Ceremony, but—”

He interrupted her. “I know you didn’t attend last year,” he said. “Do you plan to go to this one?”

Claire nodded. “I especially want to see Abe get his assigned family.”

The man hesitated, then told her. “They’re not assigning him. And no more extensions, either. They’ve run out of patience with him. They voted today.”

Behind him, the child began to churn his legs. He wanted the bike to start up again.

“But what, then? Where will he—?”

The man shrugged. “You should say goodbye now. He’ll be sent on his way in the morning.”

“On his way *where?*”

The child had heard the word “goodbye.” He opened and closed his chubby hand toward Claire. “Bye-bye!” he said. “Bye-bye!” Then he thrust his tongue into his cheek and made their secret funny face with its creased forehead and wrinkled nose. Claire tried hard to make the face back to him, but it was difficult; she was breathing hard and could feel tears rising hotly behind her eyes. “*Where?*” she asked again.

But the man simply shook his head. It seemed to Claire that he was unable to speak, that his breath was coming quickly as well. Then he gathered himself, and said offhandedly, “It’s just the way it is. It’s for the best. It’s the way the system works. And by the way, you have his name wrong. It’s not Abe.

“Ready, little guy?” he asked, swiveling his head to check on his passenger. “Off we go!” As he started forward, some pebbles spat from the path and stung Claire’s ankle.

Stunned, she watched the bicycle set off across the path that led to the family dwellings.

Years later—many years later—when Claire tried to piece together memories of her last days in the community, the last things she could see whole and clear were the bicycle moving away and the back of the child’s head. The rest of the hours that followed were fragments, like bits of shattered glass. No matter how she tried to piece them together, she could never create it whole and unblemished.

She remembered that the cargo boat was still docked. It was loading. They were rushing, for some reason. She heard someone call to another about weather concerns, a phrase she didn’t understand. There were the usual complicated sounds of the departure preparations. Whistles and shouts. The thump of the crates being stacked.

But then night came and went and the boat had not left. Something had happened in the night. There were alarm bells. In the Hatchery? Something wrong in the lab?

No. Not there. The boat? Were the alarms from the boat? No. From farther away. From the main building. And from the speakers in each room. Loud announcements. Waking everyone. But why? What had gone wrong?

It was morning now, in her memory. The boat crew had been preparing to cast off the ropes and leave. But they were delayed. Time had passed. Usually the boat was there so briefly. But this time it was longer. Something delayed the boat’s departure. Everyone was looking for something. *Someone?* Yes. It was that: Someone was missing.

Searchers came and looked along the riverbank throughout the day. Then it was dark again. Even at night they searched, with flashlights. They

shouted.

She remembered, strangely, that the nurturer had been standing on the path. Why was he there? She had never seen him there before. Now he stood there, but didn't acknowledge Claire, didn't look at her. He was looking at the river. He was calling a name.

Jonas! Jonas!

His son. Yes. That was his son.

So it was his son who had gone missing.

Piecing together the fragments of memory, Claire could feel the cool dirt of the path under her bare feet. Why would she have been barefoot? Everyone always wore shoes. And running! Why had she been running?

Now the nurturer spoke to her loudly. But what had he said? *He took him!*

Jonas took the babe! Was that what he had shouted to her?

Elsewhere! Elsewhere! (But what did that mean?)

Then, through the blurred confusion of the memories, she found that she was on the boat. She had run up the slanted plank, in her bare feet, crying. The heavyset woman, her light hair unpinned, came from the cabin and put out her arms to Claire. She remembered the feeling of enfolding. The smells: sweat and onions from the woman. Fuel and damp wood from the boat itself. A puff of smoke. The scrape of the plank being pulled aboard.

She was with them, on the boat. The engine throbbed. They were leaving. *Why was she, Claire, on the boat?*

They were headed Elsewhere. They said they would help her find the boy, and the baby.

My son, she had told them, sobbing.

Her next blurred memory was of *sea*, which she had never seen before. *Rain:* something she had never felt. *Storm. Lightning. Waves. Fear.* The men were shouting. She was in the way; they shoved her aside and rushed to tie things down. She couldn't stand. It was wet and slippery even inside the cabin. She fell. Sprawled on the floor, she heard things slide loose and break. She felt a rush of water, suddenly; it pulled at her clothing. Cold. *So cold.* And then: *Quiet. A hollow, rushing kind of quiet. Darkness.*

And that was all Claire remembered of those last days, no matter how hard she tried over the hard and lonely years that followed.

Book II

Between

One

THE SLATE GRAY sea roiled, scraping the narrow strip of sand rhythmically, tugging at beach grass, digging and sucking loose the rocks at the shore's edge. Spray stung the men's eyes when they went to tighten the ropes holding their boats secure. Salt coated their beards and eyebrows. They pulled their woven hat brims low.

Old Benedikt cupped his hand above his eyes and peered upward, assessing the sky through the pelting rain.

"It won't break for a while," he called. "Not till night." But his words were carried off by the stiff wind, and the others, tugging and twisting at the coarse ropes, didn't hear him, didn't reply.

The women remained in their cottages. Fighting the weather was men's work. The women listened to the wind as it roared in the chimneys, to the ripping sounds of torn thatch, and to the whimpering of frightened children. They tended the fires, stirred the soups, rocked the babies, and waited. This storm would pass. The sea would calm. It always had.

In the time that came after, the story of Water Claire took different forms. It was told and retold; things were forgotten, or shaped and changed. Always, though, there was this truth: that she came from the sea, flung in by that fearsome December storm years before.

Some said she was found, later, when the scudding clouds pulled aside and showed low sun in early evening: that she was there on the strip of beach, her clothes half torn from her, and they thought she was dead till she stirred and her eyes opened to show the deep amber-flecked green that later all remembered the same.

Others said no, it was Tall Andras who saw her in the waves, who threw himself in and grabbed her by her long hair as she clung to a thick wood beam, that he swam with her till he could stand, and when they looked he was there in the churning broth of sea with her in his thick arms, her head against his beard, and that he said but one word: "Mine."

Children said she was carried in by dolphins and they made games of it, and rhymes, but all of that was just tale-spinning and fun, and no one took it to be true.

Others murmured “selkie” from time to time when she was remembered, but only as a fanciful tale. The selkie stories of seal creatures were well known, oft told, and in all of them there was a shed skin. Water Claire had come in clothing, though it had been shredded by the gritty winter sea. She was human. There was no seal to her.

Or mermaid, either.

She was a human girl sent to them by the sea, who stayed among them for a time, became a woman, and went away again.

It was actually Old Benedikt himself who carried her in, once she was seen. Several, including Tall Andras, swam out, but it was Old Benedikt who reached her first, slicing his way through waves with his burly, muscled arms. He pried her loose from the wood spar, for her fingers were locked there. He knew how to wrap her lifeless arms around his neck and to hold her pale chin high above the foam and spray. He had brought wounded sheep in from the field this way many times, holding them against his chest.

He stood, finally, in the shallow surge and suck of water, walked forward, his feet heavy in the drenched, icy sand, and laid her there. He could see that she still lived, and he covered her with the thick woven coat that he had thown aside as he entered the sea. Then he turned her wet, pale face to the side. He pressed upon her through the coat until she spewed frothy brine onto the sand, and coughed.

Tall Andras was there, it is true, and he thought, gazing down, that he wanted the girl for his own, but did not give voice to it.

Old Benedikt looked up at the surrounding men. “Run ahead,” he directed Gavin, who was fastest. “Tell Alys. We’ll carry her there.”

Hastily the men gathered poles and coats and made a carrying litter, knowing how to do it for they had done it many times before. Their children fell from boats and cliffs. Their sons and brothers were wounded by hooks and rope. Their women died giving birth, and the newborns died too. They used such a litter for the slow journey to graveside.

But this girl was alive, though her eyes stayed closed and her fingers clenched as if she still felt the splintery mast in them. When they rolled her onto the litter, she coughed again, and when they lifted it to carry her up the hill, a cold breeze picked up a strand of her long wet hair, drawing it across her cheek. Her eyelashes fluttered then, and she began to tremble and whimper.

Carefully, in the increasing darkness, for twilight was brief here in winter, they moved with her up the ridge and felt with their feet for the worn path that would take them to the village and to Alys's hut at its edge. Four men carried the girl. The others walked behind. Now and then one stopped, turned, and looked out toward the sea and the horizon with its darkening sky as if searching for the silhouette of a vessel that might have thrown this astonishing gift their way. But there was nothing there but what had always been there: empty ocean the color of pewter, tarnishing to black now as night fell.

The village nestled at the foot of a forbidding cliff in the curved elbow of an arm of land. The peninsula jutted out from the main coast in an isolated place where time didn't matter, for nothing changed. No newcomers had ever appeared, not in anyone's memory, and only an occasional discontented man climbed out (for that was what they called the leaving) or tried to. An overgrown, root-tangled path meandered upward at the foot of the cliff but then disappeared at the base of a sheer rock wall, and after that there was no way to go farther but to climb. Several had fallen to their death. One, Fierce Einar, had climbed out successfully but returned, embittered by what he had encountered at the top.

He had quarreled with his father and climbed out on a winter night with a sack of his own belongings, and some he had stolen, tied to his back. When he returned, climbing back in, it almost killed him, for he was maimed by then, bloody and in terrible pain. He dropped from the final rocks onto the snowy path at the base, howling in agony and with a knowledge of failure. Then he fell silent. He crawled to a place where he could pull down a narrow tree. He stripped it of branches, broke the trunk into two pieces, and used them to haul himself upright. Then he leaned on the sticks and dragged himself home to face his father. He lost the title Fierce, and was renamed Lame Einar. Still only eighteen, still silent, he tended sheep now, and nursed a deep despair.

The best route away from the village was by sea. But the ocean was turbulent and unpredictable, with dangerous currents and constant wind. Each fisherman had found himself in peril more than once, and all had lost friends or brothers.

Alys, toothless and wrinkled though with piercing eyes and a sharp tongue, told the men roughly: "Leave us be!" when they carried the

trembling creature in to her. She tended the girl through the night. Alys was childless herself but had been midwife to many and was no stranger to damaged young. She stripped the girl of the drenched, ripped clothing, setting it aside, then rubbed her dry with rough cloth, and wrapped her in soft wool. She did all this in flickering light from a smoky oil lamp. When the girl stopped shaking, Alys stirred the herb-flavored broth that had been simmering on the fire in an iron pot. She poured some into a bowl, and fed the girl from a spoon held carefully lest she thrust it away in her fear.

But the girl sipped, wary at first, then opened her mouth for more.

"Go slow or you'll puke," Alys told her.

"What brung you?" she asked when the soup bowl was emptied. The girl's head turned and she half rose, listening to the murmur of the sea, but she did not answer and the old woman did not urge her. Instead, Alys found a comb carved of bone on the shelf nearby, and began to unsnarl and smooth the wet, salt-stiffened hair.

The wind howled through the thatch on the roof. It was deepest night now. The girl dozed, half sitting. Finally, Alys lowered her to the bed and pulled the length of wool cloth up around her bare shoulders. She watched for a few moments as the girl slept, her hair fanned about her head. Alys had always yearned for a daughter and felt that the sea had sent this one to her. After a bit she lowered the flame in the lamp so that the hut was dim, with dark shadows on its walls. She wrapped her own self in a woven blanket, sank into a nearby chair, and slept too.

In the morning the girl woke and wept softly. When she saw her clothing, all rags now encrusted with drying salt, she clutched the tatters, feeling the ruined cloth with her fingers, and then relinquished it all, turning her face to the wall. After a bit, with a resigned sigh, she took the coarse woven shift that Alys offered her, slipped it over her head, and stood. Her bare legs and arms were bruised and scraped; one ankle was badly swollen and she favored it, limping to the table where Alys had set a bowl of porridge.

Her hair was red-gold, burnished copper in the early light of winter that came through the small window and fell over her as she ate. The day was fair, as it was often after storms.

"What brung you to this place?" Alys asked her again. "What carried you and threw you to the storm?"

But again the girl did not answer, though she stared at Alys with her gold-flecked eyes. She had a puzzled look.

"Do you not understand our tongue?" Alys asked, knowing that the question was foolish, for if the answer were to be no, then the girl could not understand in order to give it.

"I am Alys." The old woman pointed to herself. "Alys," she said again, and patted her own chest in explanation. "I have no child, none ever, but I have birthed many among our women and few died in the birthing; they say I have the firm hands and the feel for it, and I also lay out the dead and sometimes can heal if the sickness is not beyond healing.

"That's why they brung you to me, for they felt you needed healing, or if not healing, then I would clean and wrap you for the grave."

The girl was watching her. Her bowl was empty, and she raised the cup of milk beside it and drank deeply.

From outside they could hear, suddenly, the giggles of children. Alys pushed a window open, peered out, and called to them. "She's alive! She eats and is whole, with no parts broken. Go and tell. And stay off now till she's rested good! She don't need the likes of you laughing and shouting about!"

"What be her name?" a child's voice called.

"Go now! We'll know her name soon enough, or give her one!" the woman called, and then there was the sound of the little ones scampering away.

With her gnarled hand she smoothed the girl's hair. "It's just the curiosity comes on them. Them three little ones are always together—best friends, they are. Delwyth, Bethan, and Eira be their names—I midwifed each one, same year. Six, they are, and full of the mischief, but they have good hearts and mean no harm."

Then the girl spoke. "My name is Claire," she said.

Two

THEY CALLED HER Water Claire.

People came to Alys's hut during the weeks that passed and brought gifts to Claire, knowing she had nothing of her own. They were a generous people, as a rule. Gareth, his bald head and round cheeks pink with shyness, made shoes for her, leather sandals with straps that she fastened around her ankles over thick knitted socks when the swelling lessened and she could walk without pain. Bryn, the mother of little Bethan, stitched a linen petticoat and took the time to embroider flowers on its edge, a fanciful touch beyond the ordinary clothing of the people, but no one scorned Bryn for it, for the girl seemed worthy of such a gift. Old Benedikt carved her a comb, which she carried in her pocket, and to the surprise of everyone, since he was fierce in his anger and solitude, Lame Einar came in from the sheep meadow, hobbling on his two sticks, and gave her a hat he had woven her from straw.

As spring came, children brought her early wildflowers in small wilting bouquets and they helped her weave the stems into the straw of the hat's brim.

She wore the brimmed hat to keep the sun from her eyes but even so needed to hold her hand there when she looked to sea because the light reflecting off the gray-white waves was blinding. She stood often on the shore with the wind blowing her hair and molding her skirt against her legs. She watched the horizon as if she waited. But she had no knowledge of what she waited for. The sea had drunk her memories away, leaving only her name.

"How old do you be, Water Claire?" asked a half-grown freckle-faced boy named Sindri. He measured himself beside her and she was the taller. But she shook her head, not knowing how to answer him. Alys was there; they were gathering herbs.

"Sixteen year or so," Alys said, telling Claire more than the boy. And they knew Alys to be true in her guess, for it was she who tended the bodies of them all, and knew the signs that each year brings.

"Sixteen," Water Claire repeated in her soft voice, and though she said no more, they knew that she was mourning the knowledge of the years that

the sea had gulped away. She watched the little girls at play, laughing as they ran through the meadow, quick and colorful as butterflies, but there was sadness in the watching, for Claire's meadow days had been taken from her. They did not come back, even in dreams.

"Sixteen?" Tall Andras repeated when he heard of it. The boy, Sindri, had told everyone, and most had shrugged. But Tall Andras rubbed his hand across his thick blond beard, looked across the marketplace to where Water Claire stood fingering ribbons at a stall, and said to his mates, "She could be wed."

It was true that in this place there were often girls given as brides at that age. Even now the village was preparing for a wedding; Glenys, shy and sparkle-eyed, would soon wed horse tender Martyn, she not yet seventeen and he barely twenty. But Old Benedikt and Alys both said no. Not this girl. Not Water Claire. She must not wed, they said firmly, until the sea gave her back what it had stolen, until she knew what her life had once been.

Tall Andras, frowning with disappointment, asked brusquely, "What if it never do?"

"It will," Old Benedikt replied.

"Bits and pieces, they'll come," Alys said, "over time."

Tall Andras glowered. He had a fierce want for the girl. "The sea pukes up dead fish," he said. "It won't give her back anything. What the sea coughs up smells of rot."

"You smell of sweat yourself, Andras," Alys told him, laughing at his misery, "and should bathe if you want the girl to come close. Wash your hair and chew some mint. Maybe then she'll give you a smile some morning."

Tall Andras stalked away, but she could see that he was headed to the freshwater pond beyond the thick trees at the edge of the village. Old Benedikt, watching, shook his head and smiled. "I told him she'll come back to herself, but truly I don't know," he told Alys. "It's as if the sea sucked away her past and left her empty. What does she say to you?"

"She remembers only waking in my hut. Nothing before. Not even being in the sea."

They walked together along the rocky path bordering a wide meadow, each of them with a stick to lean on. Old Benedikt was strong still, but

bent. Alys, too, walked with her back hunched. They had been friends for more than sixty years.

Alys carried the basket she used for gathering herbs; she was in need of raspberry leaf on this morning, to steep for tea to give Bryn. Since birthing Bethan six years before, Bryn had lost three babies and had fallen into despair. Now she was again with child, and Alys would prepare the raspberry leaf infusion for her to drink three times a day. Sometimes it tightened and held a pregnancy.

"Is there no herb for memory?" Old Benedikt asked her as she leaned to strip the raspberry leaves from the thick thorned bushes where they grew.

Alys chuckled. "Aye," she told him. "Try this." She reached to a nearby tree, peeled a tiny shred of bark, and placed it in his hand. "Chew, and think back."

Frowning, puzzled, Old Benedikt placed the shred on his own tongue. "Think back on what?"

"On a time you choose. Far back." She watched him.

He closed his eyes and chewed. "Bitter," he said, making a face.

She laughed.

After a moment he opened his eyes and spat the chewed bark from his tongue. "I thought back to the day we danced," he told her with a wry smile.

"I was thirteen," she said. "You were the same. A long way back. Was the memory clear?"

He nodded. "You had pink flowers in your hair," he said.

She nodded. "Beach roses. It was midsummer."

"And bare feet."

"Yours were bare too. It was a warm day."

"Aye. The grass was warm and damp."

"Dew," he said. "It was early morning." He looked at her for a moment. "Why were we dancing?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

"Mayhap you need to chew the bark again." She chuckled. "To remember why."

"You tell me," he said.

Alys added the last of the raspberry leaves to her basket, straightened, took up her stick, and turned on the path. "Back to the hut," she said. "My kettle's aboil, and I must steep the leaves." She began to walk away from him.

“Shall you take some of the bark for the girl? For Water Claire?” he asked.

She turned back to him and crinkled a smile at him. “The bark does naught,” she said. “It’s only the turning your mind to it. Making your mind go back.

“She’ll do that when she’s ready,” she added. “I must go now. Bryn is in need of the tea.”

He called after her as she walked away on the path. “Alys? Why were we dancing?”

“Take your mind there again,” she called back. “You’ll remember!”

To herself, she murmured, shaking her head with amusement as her eyes twinkled at her own memory. “Only thirteen. But we was barefoot and flower-strewn and foolish with first love.”

Three

CLAIRE WAS THERE, at the hut. With her coppery hair tied back by a ribbon, and a cloth tied around her waist to protect her simple homemade skirt, she was chopping the long pale green stems of early onions fresh from the garden. Newly picked greens lay heaped on the table with a thick mutton bone near them, ready to add to the pot of water that was already simmering over the fire. When Alys entered, she smiled.

"I'm starting soup," the girl said.

"Aye. I see that." Alys emptied her basket of raspberry leaves into a bowl. "I'll just take some of the water first, for my brew." With a ladle she slowly poured hot water from the pot over the leaves. Steam rose as the leaves began to steep and tint the liquid.

"For Bryn?" The girl looked at the darkening tea.

"Aye. To lose another will surely make her heartsick."

Claire leaned toward the bowl. As Alys watched, she closed her eyes and breathed the steam. At her forehead, tendrils of hair curled from the moisture, framing her pale face. For a moment she stood there, motionless, breathing. Then she gasped, drew her head back, opened her eyes, and looked around with a puzzled gaze.

"I cannot—" she began, then fell silent.

Alys went to her and smoothed the damp hair. "What is it, child?" she asked.

"I thought—" But the girl couldn't continue. Moving tentatively, she sat down in the nearby rocker and stared into the fire.

Alys watched her for a moment. Then she went to the trunk against the wall. Unopened for years, it bore an iron clasp that was rusty and worn. But Alys's strong fingers pried it loose, and she raised the heavy, carved lid. Her father had made this trunk for her mother almost a century before, a bride-gift when they were wed. It had come to Alys when her mother died. Her mother had stored things in it: linens and baby dresses, sprinkled with dried lavender blossoms. None of those things remained, though the scent of the lavender lingered. Alice used the trunk only for treasures, and there were few enough of those in her life.

Now she reached through the things within and took from near the bottom a fragile bit of folded cloth. Holding it, she went to the rocker and said to the girl: “Watch now.”

Gently she unfolded the cloth and showed her bits of torn brown shreds. “Smell,” Alys told her, and held it to the girl’s nose.

“Old,” Claire said. “Sweet.” She leaned back in the chair and sighed. “What is it?”

“Beach roses from sixty years ago.”

“Why—”

“To hold memories. Scents do that. When you smelled the tea—”

“Yes. For a moment something came back,” the girl acknowledged. “Like a bit of breeze. It drifted past. I couldn’t keep it with me. I wanted —” But she couldn’t say what she wanted. She sighed and shook her head. “It went away.”

“It’s waiting,” Alys said. Carefully she refolded the cloth around the dried petals and leaves and replaced the little packet in the carved trunk. Then, while Claire watched, she strained the dark tea and poured it carefully into small bottles, which she corked tightly. “I’ll take this now to Bryn,” she said.

“Add a raspberry leaf or two to the soup. And some of that sorrel from the garden. It’ll give flavor,” she added. “Those greens you have give bulk, but their taste is ordinary.”

Claire nodded. Alys watched as the girl pushed the chopped onions into a neat pile with the side of her hand.

“Did you cook once, mayhap?” Alys asked.

The girl looked up. She frowned and furrowed her brow. “I don’t think so,” she said, finally.

“But something come back to you a minute ago,” Alys said, “when you breathed the tea.”

Claire stood thinking. She closed her eyes. Then, finally, she looked up and shrugged. “It wasn’t the tea,” she said. “It came from something else, I think.”

“You talk elegant,” Alys said with a chuckle. “Probably somebody done your cooking for you, once.”

Claire took a deep breath, still thinking. Then she picked up the stirring spoon and turned toward the pot of simmering soup. “Well,” she said, “those days are gone.”

The three little girls, Bethan, Delwyth, and Eira, barefoot and grass-stained, smoothed and tidied the little corner of meadow that they called their Tea Place. A flat rock there became their table; they decorated it with blossoms from the clumps of wildflowers nearby. With a leafy branch acting as a broom, Eira swept the ground around the rock. “Sit down, dear ladies,” she said. “Now that it’s tidy here, we’ll have tea.”

It was a game they often played, serving imaginary tea to one another, pretending to be grown women.

“Your hair’s a wee bit straggled, Miss Bethan,” Eira said haughtily as she set the broom aside. “Was you rushed? I’d expect you’d be more primped up, and maybe brush some, when you’ve got a tea invite.”

Bethan giggled and pulled at her unruly curls. “So sorry, Miss Eira,” she said. “This baby in my belly makes me forgetful.” Dramatically she pulled her frock away from her own thin middle.

“Can I have a belly baby too?” whispered solemn-eyed Delwyth.

“Yes. Let’s all.” Eira tugged at her own skirt. “Oh, I do hope mine is born soon, because I’m so weary of being fat.”

“Yes, fat is hard,” Delwyth agreed in a serious voice. “It makes you breathe all puffy.

“When do you expect yours?” she asked the others. “Mine’s coming tomorrow. I do hope for a boy. I’m going to name him . . .” She pondered briefly. “Dylan,” she decided. “Tea?” Delicately she sipped from her own imaginary cup.

“Oops!” Bethan announced. “Mine just be born. A little girl.” She cradled an invisible baby in her arms.

“Mine too!” The other two little girls announced. Rhythmically they rocked their invisible infants.

“My mum be cross with me if she knowed we did this,” Bethan confided. “She says it be bad luck to pretend about a baby.”

Delwyth stopped her rocking motion. “Bad luck?”

Bethan nodded.

“Better we don’t do it, then. We can pretend tea, though.” Delwyth smoothed her skirt. “Want a teacake?” She offered the other girls each a twig.

Eira pretended to chew. “You be a fine cook, Miss Delwyth,” she said.

Delwyth nodded solemnly. “I learnt it from the queen,” she said, “when I be’d a helper in her kitchen.”

Claire, listening from where she stood in a small grove of trees nearby, smiled at the sweetness of the children. But their conversation troubled her, as well, because it reminded her of what she had lost. It was more than the loss of memories. She had no knowledge. She wondered what a *queen* might be. Had she known that once? Had she played this way, once?

This baby in my belly makes me forgetful, one little girl had said. Claire, working now with Alys, preparing the herbs for Bethan’s mother, understood what the child was pretending. Why did it make Claire feel so unbearably sad?

She straightened her straw hat and walked slowly back to the hut with the herbs she had been sent to find and gather. She resolved that she would learn. She would learn everything—about queens, whatever they were; and herbs, and birds, and how the men farmed and what they thought, and the women, too, how they spent their hours, and what they talked about, what they dreamed, what they yearned for.

It would be a start, Claire thought. Perhaps somehow she would learn her own lost life.

From a field higher up, where he was prying weeds from the rocky soil with his hoe, Tall Andras stopped his work, wiped sweat from his glistening forehead, and watched the mysterious girl walk along the path. She had favored one leg for some weeks, until the bruise and swelling disappeared. He had worried for her, that she might become hunched and lame, as people did when their wounds went unhealed. Andras’s own father, flung years before against rocks when a boat swung around and tipped, still held one arm locked into a curved and crooked shape.

But he could see that Water Claire strode easily now along the path, her legs strong and equal, her feet sure in the soft leather sandals she wore. He watched her make her way easily to the turning; then she disappeared into the woods, heading back to the hut she shared with Alys.

A shadow crossed the ground in front of him, and Tall Andras looked up and waved his arm at the crows that circled the field. His weeding was turning up bugs and worms, morsels that the crows wanted, he knew, and it put his seedlings at risk. He couldn’t afford to lose the crops. Winter was

long here, and in the good weather seasons they prepared for it: growing, catching, storing things away. His father was getting old and his mother had been unwell for months, with fever that came and went. Tall Andras was young, just seventeen, but the family depended on him. He would make a bird-scarer, a *mommet*, he decided. Last summer that had helped. And he had a large gourd in the shed that he could use for a head, with a face carved on it: a fierce face. He twisted his own face, practicing, pushing his lips up against his nose, and then flapped his arms, the way the cloth of his mommet might flap in the wind to frighten away the crows.

Then he stopped, feeling childish and foolish, and glad that the girl had not seen. For her, he wanted to seem a wise and hard-working man, worthy soon of a wife.

Four

THEY NOTICED THAT creatures frightened her. A chipmunk, tamed by the little girls, sat on Eira's hand nibbling at the seeds they gave to it. But Claire backed away with a startled look.

"You never seen one before, then, Water Claire?" Bethan asked her. "They not be harmful."

"You can touch him," Delwyth suggested. "He don't mind."

But Claire shook her head no. She was fearful of the smallest of creatures—a mouse, scurrying across the floor of Alys's hut, almost caused her to faint—and fascinated in a worried sort of way with birds. She found frogs amusing but strange. And she was completely, utterly terrified of cows. Claire held her breath and looked away when she had to pass the place where a scrawny milk cow, its wrinkled mouth moving as it placidly chewed on the rough grass, was fenced beside the cottage where Tall Andras lived with his parents.

"I must try to learn creatures," she said to Alys apologetically. "It's not right to be so fearful. Even the smallest of the children feel at home with the creatures."

"Mayhap you had a run-in with a creature once." Alys was in the rocker, knitting with gray wool in the dim, flickering light.

Claire sighed. "I don't know. But it's not a feeling of a bad memory. It's as if I have never seen them before."

"Fish neither?"

"Fish are familiar," Claire said slowly. "I think I have known of fish somehow. They don't frighten me. I like how silvery they look."

"Nary birds?"

Claire shook her head and shuddered. "Their wings seem so unnatural. I can't get used to them. Even the littlest ones are strange to me."

Alys thought, and rocked. Her wooden needles clicked in her gnarled hands. Finally she said, "Lame Einar has a way with birds. I'll have him catch us one, for a pet."

"Pet?"

"A plaything. A pretty. He'll make a cage for it, from twigs."

Claire cringed at the thought, but agreed. It would be a start to the learning.

One afternoon she stood barefoot on the beach, watching the trio of little girls. Using sticks, they had outlined a house and were furnishing it with debris they found in the sand.

"Here's my bed!" Bethan announced, and patted an armful of seaweed into a shape.

"And cups in the kitchen!" Eira set five scoop-shaped shells in a row. She lifted one daintily and pretended to drink from it.

Delwyth ran to fetch a branch she saw beside some rocks, and dragged it back. Torn from a nearby tree by the constant wind, it was crowned with a thicket of leaves. "Broom! I found us a broom!" the little girl announced happily, and scraped the sand with it. "Wait. It needs fixing." Carefully she tugged at a thin side branch, broke it loose, and tossed it aside. "There. Now it's a proper broom."

Claire, watching, leaned down and picked up the slender branch that Delwyth had discarded. The sand was damp and she saw her own footprints in it. With the tip of the branch, she poked a round hole in each of her own toeprints, then laughed and scribbled the footprints away with the stick. A gentle surge of seawater moved in silently, smoothed the roughened sand, and receded.

She leaned forward and wrote the first letter of her name.

C.

Then *L.* And *A.*

But a foamy inrush of seawater erased the letters.

Claire moved back slightly, farther from the sea's edge, and began again. *CLAIRE,* she wrote.

"What be that?" A shadow fell across her letters. It was Bethan, looking down.

"My name."

The little girl stared at it.

"Would you like to do your name beside it?" Claire offered her the stick.

"How?" she asked.

"Just make the letters."

"What be letters?"

Claire was startled at first. Then she thought: *Oh. They haven't learned yet.* She had a sudden image of herself, learning. Of a teacher, explaining the sounds of letters. There was a place she had gone, a place called school. All children did. But she looked around now, at the cliff and hills and huts, at the sea—she could see the boats bobbing in the distance, and the men leaning in with their nets—and she was uncertain.

"Will you go to school soon?" she asked Bethan.

"What be school?"

She didn't know how to answer the child. And maybe, she realized, it wasn't important. Six letters; they made a name. What did it matter? She looked again at the word she had written, then erased it with her own toes, stamped the sand firm, and tossed the stick into a pile of glistening kelp nearby.

Alys had sent Old Benedikt to ask the favor of Lame Einar. Not long after, slow on his ruined feet, the young man made his way laboriously down from his hut on the hillside, carrying the twig cage on his back, with the bird inside.

"Here it be," he told Alys.

Einar was not one for talking. His failures had made him a recluse, but people remembered the vulnerable boy he had once been. Though he had stolen from his father, they forgave him that; his father had been a harsh and unjust man. That he had climbed out, many admired, for the cliff was steep and jagged and the world beyond unknown; few had the courage that Einar had had. They regretted his failure, but they welcomed his damaged return. Einar, though, had never forgiven himself; he lived in self-imposed shame and stayed mostly silent.

"It sings," he said. He leaned his two sturdy sticks against Alys's hut and hung the cage on a tree branch near the entrance. He watched for a moment until the carefully crafted perch inside stopped swaying and the little finch stilled the nervous flutter of its bright-colored wings. Then Lame Einar took up his sticks again; he righted himself between them, for balance, and went slowly away.

The bird was chirping when Claire returned from the beach, carrying her sandals. She stopped in surprise, looking at the cage and the bird within. "It can't get out, can it?" she asked nervously.

Alys laughed. “Were you to take it in your hand, child, it would tremble in fear. Have you never been near to a wee bird before?”

Claire shook her head no.

“You’ll feed it each day. Seeds, mostly, and some of the bugs from the field.”

“I don’t like the bugs,” Claire whispered.

“It will help when you learn them. Fear dims when you learn things.”

The bird chirped loudly, and Claire jumped. Alys laughed at her again.

Claire took a breath and calmed herself. She went closer and peered into the cage. The bird tilted its head and looked back at her. “It should have a name,” Claire said.

“Name it, then. It be yours.”

“I’ve never named a single thing.”

Alys frowned, and she looked at Claire with her squinted eyes. “Do you know that, then?” she asked.

Claire sighed. “I feel it, that’s all.”

“Naming is hard. Someone named you once.”

Claire looked away. “I suppose,” she said slowly, and then turned her attention again to the cage. “Look! It cleans itself!” She pointed. The bird had raised one wing and pecked fastidiously at its feathers beneath. “Isn’t that a lovely patch of color on his wing?” She hesitated, then asked, “What is it called? I know *red.* You taught me red from the berries. It’s a pretty red there around his eyes, but what is that bright color on his wing? I can’t think of its name.”

Alys was troubled by this, for she knew by now that the girl was clever, and filled with knowledge of many things. But she seemed lacking in so many ways, and the realm of colors was one. The names of the various hues were one of the first things small children learned. Yet when Alys had sent Claire on a simple errand some days ago, asking her to fetch some jewelweed, which Alys needed to treat a painful poison ivy rash on one of Old Benedikt’s grandsons, Claire had not known how to find the flower that grew in such profusion by the stream. “The bright orange blossoms,” Alys reminded her. “We gathered some the other day.”

“I forget *orange*,” Claire had said, embarrassed. “We gathered several things that day. What does *orange* look like?”

And now she could not name the color that decorated the wing of the little singing finch.

“Yellow,” Alys told her. “The same as evening primrose, remember?”

“Yellow,” Claire repeated, learning it. Yellow-wing became the bird’s name.

On a cool foggy morning, she climbed the hill to find Lame Einar and thank him. It had taken a while to accustom herself to the bird, to end her fearfulness around it. But now it hopped to the side of the cage when she brought seeds to it in a little shell dish and waited, head cocked, while she set the dish down. It would have hopped onto her finger, she knew, if she had held it still and waited. But she wasn’t ready for that, or for the feeding of live insects. The little girls took on that task, happy to find beetles and hoppers in the grass and bring them to Yellow-wing.

She found Einar near his hut. He was seated on a flat rock, cleaning a wooden bowl, scrubbing the cracks in the rounded poplar with a rag dipped in fire ash. Nearby, through the fog, she could hear the sheep move in the grass, and an occasional bleat. She approached the young man. She was nervous, not to be with Einar, who was always silent and unknowable, but because of the sounds of the animals.

He was startled to see her, and lowered his eyes to the bowl. Had he heard her coming, he would have fled into the fog and disappeared. But Claire had been silent, appearing without warning from the swirling gray mist, and his maimed feet made it impossible for him to jump and run.

“Good morning,” she said, and he nodded in reply.

“I came to thank you for the bird,” she told him.

“It’s nought but a bird,” he muttered.

Claire stared at him for a moment. A word came to her from nowhere. He’s *lonely,* she thought. People say he’s angry, and hermitlike, but it’s loneliness that afflicts him.

She looked around, and saw a log nearby. “May I sit down?” she asked politely. He grunted an assent and scraped some more at the spotless bowl in his hands.

“I know it’s just a bird,” she told him, “but you see, I have been afraid of birds. They’re strange to me; I don’t know why. And so the little bird you brought me—I call him Yellow-wing . . .”

She saw his puzzled look and laughed. “I know. It’s just his color. But I’m only learning colors. They’re as strange to me as birds. And so it’s a help, to call him Yellow-wing. I say his name when I put his dish of seeds

in the cage. And you know what? He's singing now. He was afraid at first, but now he sings!"

Einar looked at her. Then he arranged his mouth, gave a small sound as a trial, and then reproduced the sound of the small bright-colored bird, with its trill and fluttering whistle.

Claire listened in delight. "Could you do the songs of other birds?" she asked him. But he ducked his head in embarrassment and didn't reply. He set the bowl aside and reached for his sticks.

"Sheep need me," he said brusquely. He rose and moved with his awkward gait into the edge of the foggy meadow. He was no more than a blurred outline when she heard him call back to her. "Greens!" he called. "Not the color. But he needs greens. Willow buds be good, and dandelion!"

Then he was gone, but as she gathered herself to leave, she heard him whistle the song of the bird once again.

Alys and Old Benedikt stood watching the preparations for the marriage of Glenys and Martyn. Friends of the couple had built a kind of bower from supple willow branches and now they were decorating it with blossoms and ferns. Beyond, on tables made of board and set outside for the occasion, the women were arranging food and drink.

"It's a fine day," Alys commented, squinting at the cloudless sky.

"I was wed in rain," Old Benedikt said with a chuckle, "and never noticed a drop of it."

She smiled at him. "I remember your wedding day," she said. "And Ailish, all smiles. You must miss her, Ben."

He nodded. His wife of many years had died from a sudden fever the winter before, with their children and grandchildren watching in sorrow. She was buried now in the village graveyard with a small stone marker marking her place, and room beside her for Old Benedikt when his time came.

"Look there, at Tall Andras, watching the girl," Old Benedikt said with a chuckle, and pointed. "He's bent near double with longing for her, isn't it so?"

They both watched with amusement as the young man's lovesick gaze followed Claire, who was helping with the flowers. She hardly noticed him.

"She puzzles me, Benedikt."

“Aye. She’s a mystery. But a splendid one!” While they watched, Claire lifted one of the little girls and helped her weave daisies into the twigs of the bower. The other little ones waited eagerly for their turns. “They follow her like kittens after the mother cat, don’t they?”

“Do you know she fears cats? Even kittens? As if she never see’d such before,” Alys told him.

“And birds, I hear.”

“Lame Einar caught a bird for her, and wove a cage for it. She’s learning to like it now, for it sings nicely. But, Ben—?”

“Aye?”

“I had to tell her the colors of it. She don’t know the names! Yellow, and red: it’s as if they are new to her. And yet she’s clever! Clever as can be! She creates games for the little girls, and helps me with the herbs, but—”

“I never knowed one who couldn’t say the colors. Not even one who is weak in the mind, like Ailish’s nephew, who’s like a young boy though he’s thirty! Even he cries for his blue shirt instead of the green,” Old Benedikt said.

“Not Water Claire. She may long for the blue but don’t know its name. She’s learning now. But she’s like a babe about it.”

“So you’ve got you a wee babe to tend, after all these years without,” he teased her.

He patted her hip through her thick skirt, and she pushed his hand away. “Let me be, you old fool,” she told him fondly.

Five

"TELL ME ABOUT weddings," Claire asked as she and Alys carried the nutcake they had made to the feast table, where it would be placed with the festive puddings and sweets. "Does everyone have one? Did you?"

Alys laughed. "Not me," she said. "But most do, when they reach an age, as Martyn and Glenys. When they choose each other, and the parents say aye, then we have the Handfasting. Always in summer, usually at new moon."

Summer. Claire had learned, already, from Alys that summer is a time of year, the time of sunshine and crops and the birth of young animals. It had been one more thing she had not known.

She waited while Alys rearranged some of the other foods in order to make room. Then she set down their cake and together they decorated its edge with yellow daisies.

The village people were gathering. No one, not even the fishermen, was at work today. Babies perched atop their fathers' shoulders. Claire saw Tall Andras with his parents, the three of them scrubbed and dressed in their best clothing. She could see that his mother was not well; she leaned on her son, and was flushed with fever, though she smiled and greeted the others.

Bryn waved to Claire. She was holding Bethan's hand. For once the three little girls were separate, each with their families. Claire could see that beneath her lace-trimmed apron, Bryn's body had thickened with the coming child. Alys thought the time of danger was past and that this one would survive.

"Oh! What's that?" Claire asked, startled at a sound. From the path, several young village men approached and the crowd opened to make way for them. One was blowing into a carved flute. Another kept time on a small drum made from an animal skin stretched across a hollowed gourd. The third plucked at strings stretched across a long-necked instrument made of wood. Moving in time with the melody, they entered the circle that had opened to admit them as Claire watched from where she and Alys stood at the edge.

“It’s so lovely! Listen! How they make the sounds go together! I’ve never heard anything like that before!”

Alys frowned. “It’s music, child. Have you never heard music? Have you forgotten it?”

“No, never,” Claire whispered. “I’m quite sure.”

The Handfasting ceremony ended as Martyn and Glenys kissed each other, and the red ribbon that had been wound around them unfurled, loosened, and freed them. The musicians began again, with a louder, rollicking tune, and the villagers cheered and turned to the waiting feast.

Claire stood silent, awed by the music, puzzled by the concept of love, and moved by both the solemnity and the celebration of the occasion. When she turned to look through the noisy, laughing throng for Alys, she suddenly noticed Lame Einar standing alone on a small rise at the edge of the meadow. While she watched, he adjusted the two sticks that supported him, turned, and hobbled slowly away. For a moment she thought of running over to invite him back, to entice him to join in. But her attention was drawn by the music. Never had she heard such an enticing thing as music, she was sure of it! And now the villagers were choosing partners, forming lines, and moving in time to the cheerful melody. Surely Einar would enjoy watching, even if he couldn’t do the quick hopping steps that they all seemed to know. They could watch together. But when she looked back for him, it was too late. He had disappeared into the woods.

Back to daily tasks after the excitement and holiday of the Handfasting, Tall Andras knelt in the field and meticulously tied together the thick branches that would form the body of the mommet. Then, after he had decided on a spot, in the center of the young, sprouting crops, he pushed the main branch into the earth and patted the dirt firmly around its base so that it stood upright without tilting. He dressed it, carefully fitting the wide sleeves of a ragged coat over the two stick arms. He tied a sash around the middle to hold the coat closed, but loosely, so that the breeze would lift and sway the fabric. He stood back and watched with satisfaction as the cloth moved. The ends of the arm branches, extending from the sleeves, looked like beckoning, skeletal hands.

Claire, approaching on her way to the stream, watched with a smile. She understood what he was doing, though she had never seen a mommet

before. She stopped, watched, then called to Andras: “Do you have a ribbon? If you added a long ribbon, it would wave in the wind.”

He shook his head.

“I’ll bring you one, if you like,” she suggested, coming closer.

He stood back and looked at his creation. “A ribbon would be good,” he acknowledged, “around the neck.”

Claire laughed. “The neck?” she asked. There was only the gnarled branch end protruding upward from the patched coat.

Andras laughed as well. “I’ll make the head now,” he told her, and showed her the large gourd waiting on the ground. He knelt beside it and with his knife carved a hole at one end. He dug out several inches of the pulpy flesh within, then placed the gourd atop the neck, fitting it down so that it sat firm. Claire could see that it looked, indeed, like a head, and that from a distance the entire mommet would seem a frightening, flapping creature. The crows would surely avoid it and the crops would be protected.

He lifted the yellow gourd off the neck and set it on the ground again. “It needs a face,” he told her.

She sat on the soft earth and watched him begin to carve. First he gouged two circles near each other in the center of the gourd, then scraped at the rind between and below the eyes, to create the impression of a nose.

Impulsively Claire tore some handfuls of grass from the earth and handed them to him. “Hair,” she said.

He laughed and draped the hair over the gourd. It slid away and he looked around. “Wait,” he told her. “I can make it stay.” He left her with the gourd lying on the ground and went over to the edge of the woods. As she watched, he found the pine tree he had in mind, and pulled a length of one supple branch loose. “Oh, aye,” he murmured. “This is good.” He brought it back to where she was sitting and showed her the wetness from the torn end, where the bark glistened. He held it for her to sniff the woodsy pine scent.

“Alys makes a pillow filled with the needles,” she told him.

He nodded. He was smearing the oozing resin on the gourd. “Aye, it soothes the sleep,” he said. “Look now!” He picked up the torn grass and pasted it on the gourd’s head, where it settled in tufty clumps, held tight by the sticky sap. They both laughed as he held it up. “Some mommet!” Andras said with pride.

“Needs a mouth,” Claire reminded him. She pictured a grin on the odd creature.

“Aye, it does.” He bent over it, carving meticulously. She watched as he worked. Now and then he drew back, examined his own efforts, and then leaned forward to correct the shape, to trim the curves. She saw him smooth the mouth edges with his finger. He flicked away some tiny shreds of gourd.

“May I see?” she asked him.

“Wait.” He moved his blade to the expanse of yellow rind above the gouged eyes, and she could see him make three deep rippled cuts across the broad forehead. He looked at it and laughed in delight. “There!” he said. He stood, holding it, and placed it carefully over the wooden neck, easing it down into place.

“There!” he said again proudly, and turned with a grin to see her reaction.

Claire stared. The grotesque face stared back at her. Its forehead was wrinkled by the wide cuts, which made it looked puzzled, and the eyes squinted above the twisted nose. The mouth was a tortured smile, a leer. She caught her breath and felt her heart pound. Andras was laughing. She turned to him, horrified, not knowing why, and cheerfully he twisted his own face into a mimicry of the mommet. He thrust his tongue into his cheek, wrinkled his nose and creased his forehead. He made a chortling sound.

The skewed face, the laughter with it, made something flood into Claire’s memory, surging upward in her like a wave about to break. She had made that face once, and thought it funny. Someone had made it back to her. But why? *Who?* She pulled herself upward from the place where she had been sitting in the grass so cheerfully a moment before. She felt sick, suddenly, and began to cry.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry—”

Then she turned and ran, sobbing and breathless, down the hillside as Tall Andras stood uncomprehending beside the wretched, ragged stick figure with its bulbous head. High above him, two crows wheeled in the sky and cried out.

Alys had been busy sorting and separating her dried plants when Claire burst through the door, her face wet with tears, and threw herself onto the

bed. It was clear that this was not a thwarted romance or a quarrel with a friend, the usual cause for the weeping of young girls. This was raw and deep. The old woman poured steaming water from the kettle over a few pinches of blue vervain and chamomile, then put the mug of herbal tea into Claire's hands. She watched with concern as the girl sat huddled and shaking in the dim light of the hut.

"Something's come back, then," Alys said. "Something cruel."

Claire nodded. She took a few shuddering breaths and sipped the soothing drink.

"It helps to say it," Alys suggested.

Claire looked up at her. "I can't," she said. "It was so close! It was there, so close! And I can feel it, still, but I can't grasp what it is."

"What brung it? Where be you, when it come so close?"

"Over on the hillside, with Andras. I was helping him build a stick figure to frighten the crows away."

"A mommet."

"Yes. That's what he called it."

"Tall Andras is a good lad. Surely it was nothing he done?"

Claire hesitated. "I don't think so. I can't remember, exactly. We were laughing, and then—well, everything changed. I can't think why."

"Something brung it. Want I should ask Andras?"

Claire closed her hands around the mug and breathed the tea's steam. "I don't know." She whispered, after a moment, "I feel so sad."

Alys watched her, and knew that the herbs in the mug would soothe the panic that had afflicted her, that soon she would calm and likely sleep for a bit. But they would not heal her. It would be hard to heal a girl as desperately wounded as this one.

Six

THE GOOD-WEATHER DAYS continued. The sun turned the wave tips to sparkling jewels, and the fishermen filled their nets each day with their glistening catch. In Tall Andras's field the mommet flapped its loose fabric arms and the crows, made timid by it, called out harshly and went to other fields, other crops. The gourd head began to rot in the sun and collapse upon itself, oozing and purple like a bruise. A bold starling swooped and grabbed some of the browning grass that had been its hair. One day it fell sideways into the field. When Claire walked past on her way to gather herbs, she saw only the toppled, ruined remains. The memory it had brought her was no longer there.

Andras's mother, Eilwen, weakened and no longer left her bed. Alys tended her there, holding her head so that she could sip warm liquid made from chopped wild sunflower roots simmered in spring water. The medicine eased her cough. But it was a comfort, not a cure. "She'll not live," Alys told Claire.

Claire had learned about death already in her time here, for they had buried an old fisherman earlier, and she had helped Alys wash and wrap the gaunt body before his sons lifted it into the box they had built. The fisherman's death had been sudden, though, in his sleep. Now Claire watched, day by day, as Eilwen drifted in her mind, woke less often, and seemed to shrink. Finally, early one evening, with Andras and his father there, her breath slowed and stopped.

The father and son touched her forehead gently as a goodbye and went away.

Alys squeezed cloths that she lifted from the pail of water, handed one to Claire, and together they began to wash the thin body. Clean wrappings were folded nearby, waiting.

"The day they brung you from the sea," the old woman said, "I washed you like this."

"Did you think I would die?"

Alys shook her head. "I could see you was strong. You fought me some." She chuckled softly as she patted Eilwen's arm dry and laid it back gently on the bed.

“I don’t remember.”

“No, you wasn’t yourself yet. It was your sleep self what fought me.”

“Here.” She handed Claire a dry cloth and together they dried and tidied the dead woman, folding her arms finally across her gaunt chest. Alys brushed her thin hair and they carefully wrapped her. They could hear the two men moving outside, readying the box.

“They’ll be needing a woman here,” Alys said, glancing around the crude hut. The cooking vessels were unwashed and a blanket thrown across a chair was stained and in need of mending.

“Yes,” Claire agreed. “Men don’t tend houses well, do they?”

“Tall Andras is of an age to wed,” Alys said pointedly.

Claire shrugged. “He should, then.”

“It’s you he wants.”

Claire knew it to be true. She blushed. “I’m not of a mind to wed,” she murmured.

Alys didn’t hear, or pretended not to. “He’ll want sons.”

“All men do, I expect.” It was something Claire had observed, in the village. Sons carried on the outside work; they took on the boats and the fields as their fathers grew old.

Alys busied herself with tying the cords that held the wrappings firmly in place around Eilwen’s remains. Claire, silent now, helped her. She thought how proud Eilwen must have once been, to have birthed a strong boy like Andras.

They sat back. Their work was finished. In a moment they would call the men, father and son, to lift the woman into her coffin. The village would gather in the morning to place it in the earth.

“On that day, the day I tended you,” Alys said to Claire, “I saw your wound.”

“Wound?”

“Your belly.”

Claire placed her hand there protectively. She looked at the ground. “I don’t—” she began, then faltered.

“It’s a grievous wound. Someone tended it, stitched it up. There are the marks.”

“I know,” Claire whispered.

“One day it will come back to your mind, like everything else.”

“Perhaps.”

“But I fear this: that you will not be able to give birth. I think it has been taken from you.”

Claire was silent.

Alys leaned forward and turned the flame higher in the oil lamp. It was darkening outside. “There are other ways a woman finds worth,” she said in a firm, knowing voice.

“Yes.”

“Come. We’ll bring the men inside to be with her now.”

They rose and went out into the evening where Tall Andras and his father waited in a light rain, their faces resigned.

In her mind, Claire made a list of what was new to her.

Colors, of course. She was grateful for knowing them now: the red of hollyberries, and the red ribbon of the Handfasting—she marveled at the vibrancy and vigor of it. And she had come to feel bathed in contentment when the sky was blue, as it was on these late-summer days. Sometimes the sea was quiet and blue as well, but most days it churned dark gray-green, with spumes of white blown and dissolved in the air. Claire liked that darkness as well, with its relentless motion and mystery, though she blamed the sea for hiding her past in its depths.

Yellow she loved for its playfulness. Yellow-wing, her little bird, came to her finger now when she poked it between the twigs that formed his cage. He hopped onto it and tilted his head at her with a questioning look. She wondered why she had ever been so frightened of birds.

They were added to her list of newly learned things: birds, and animals of all sorts. She still skirted the cow uneasily when she walked past, but she had become fond of Lame Einar’s sheep, especially the small ones, who frolicked in the tall meadow grass and showed their pink tongues when they bleated in excitement.

Einar told her of wolves, but she had not seen one and did not want to, ever.

She took joy in butterflies and scolded the little girls for catching them. “You’ve ruined it now,” she said, looking sadly at the crumpled spotted wings in Bethan’s outstretched hand. “It deserved to live, and to fly.” Together they buried the dead creature, but later she saw the child chasing another.

She feared bees, and most bugs.

“You’re like a wee child,” Alys said to her, laughing when Claire backed away nervously from a fat beetle on a bush where they were gathering large leaves of goldenseal. Infusion of goldenseal eased the sore throat that sometimes afflicted fishermen after long days in the boats.

“I’ve just never seen them before,” Claire explained, as she had often, of so many things.

Her list included lightning, which astonished her; thunder, which terrified her; and frogs, which made her laugh aloud. A rainbow one morning made her almost faint with delight and surprise.

Seven

CLAIRE JOINED IN the harvesting at the end of summer, and the rejoicing after. The crops were brought in and stored, and in the fields the birds picked at the strewn leavings. Apples were ripening still, but the early ones were picked and pressed into cider.

She could see that the days were shorter now. In summer the children had played barefoot into the evening, chasing one another until their shadows grew long. The men fished until there were stars, and still the sky did not darken until they brought their catch ashore. Now, though, the air turned brisk late in the afternoon. The sun seemed to topple down to the edge of the horizon and colored it crimson there until it was gulped by the sea and gone. The wind rose then, taking the brown leaves in a whirl from the trees, and smoke wafted from the chimneys of cottages as fires were fed. The smoke carried with it the scent of soups and stews: nourishment for chilly nights. Women unraveled the sweaters their children had outgrown. They rolled the yarn and started again with it, forming new patterns, bright stripes, in larger sizes. Nothing was wasted. Boys carved buttons from bone.

Tall Andras gave Claire a fringed shawl that had been his mother's. Most days were still sunlit and warm, but in the evenings she wrapped the soft shawl around her. Lame Einar, seeing how she tied the ends to fasten it closed, created a clasp from willow twigs that he'd soaked to soften and then twisted into a curled design. Carefully he attached the two pieces to the green shawl and showed her how to fit them into each other and hold the thick fabric tight together.

She noticed one morning, early, that her breath was visible in the cold, clear air. "Like mist," she said to Alys.

"Steam," Alys replied.

They were on their way to the cottage at the edge of the woods where Bryn lived with her fisherman husband and their little girl. Bethan had burst into their hut just before daybreak, shivering with the cold because she had forgotten her sweater, and breathless with excitement.

"My mum's pains have begun and my dad says come because he wants no part in it!"

“Run back, child, and tell her we’ll be there shortly.” Alys spoke in a calm voice while she rose, prodded the fire, and reached for her clothing.

“You’ll come too, won’t you, Water Claire?” Bethan begged. Claire had sat up and yawned.

“I will. Go tell your dad he’s a big baby himself.” Claire knew Bethan’s father, that he was gentle and loving. But men were not good at this.

The little girl giggled. Claire swung her bare feet to the floor and winced at the cold. She reached for the knitted socks that Alys had made for her. “Go now! Scat!” she said, and Bethan, gleeful, left the hut and scampered back along the lane.

Yellow-wing, whose cage had been brought inside at the end of summer, shifted on his perch and chirped. Alys rolled a leaf tightly and slipped it between the bars for him to nibble. Claire finished dressing. She fastened her leather sandals over the warm socks and watched as the old woman gathered things from the shelves in the corner. Suddenly, watching, she shuddered.

“Why do you need a knife?”

Alys placed the knife carefully beside the corked containers of herbal infusions. She rolled them all in a soft leather skin and placed the bundle inside her bag. She added a large stack of clean folded cloths to the bag and pulled its drawstring tight.

“Some say it eases pain to lay a knife beneath the bed.”

“Is it true?”

Alsy shrugged. “Likely not. But if the person thinks it, then the thinking eases the pain.” She wrapped her thick knitted shawl around her and hefted the bag over her shoulder. “And I need the knife for the cord.”

Claire pulled her own shawl tight and fastened it with the willow clasp.

“Bring the lamp,” Alys told her.

Together they hurried along the path. Claire held the lamp high and it made their way easier. But the sky itself was lightening now. The moon was a thin sliver against the gauzy gray of earliest morning. Bryn’s child would be a daylight baby.

They could see when they arrived that Bethan in her excitement had dashed about in the shadowy dawn and wakened her friends. Now all three little girls, still in their sleeping garments, were giggling nervously in the small room where Bryn groaned and twisted on the bed. Alys firmly shooed them back outdoors.

“Don’t come back till the sun is full up. And then you come with your arms filled with flowers from the meadow, to welcome the babe.”

“They’ll find some dried asters still,” she told Claire, “and late goldenrod. And it will keep them out from underfoot.”

The coming baby’s father was nowhere in sight. Alys had told Claire that men were frightened by birthing.

She had watched Lame Einar, though, help his ewes to bear young in early spring. He was both firm and gentle with them, and unafraid. Einar hadn’t minded that she stood watching when she came upon the scene. It was the first time she had ever seen him smile, when he unfolded the damp legs of a newborn and set it wobbling on its feet so that it could nudge its mother for milk.

“They don’t really need me,” he told her gruffly. “They can birth alone unless there’s trouble.”

“But it’s nice you’re there to help,” Claire said.

Einar had shrugged, patted the rump of the nursing ewe, and reached for his sticks to hobble away. Claire watched him for a moment after he turned his back. Then she too walked on.

But that had been months before. The spring lambs were tall now, playful, and thick with wool. Einar was no longer so shy with her. Once he startled her by making a harsh cackling sound, suddenly, and then a series of soft clucks. She looked at him in surprise.

“You asked me once could I do other birds. That’s a pheasant,” he explained.

Then he looked up at something very large, soaring above the sea. He gave a long, hoarse call. “Black-backed gull,” he said.

Now he let her help when he gathered the sheep in for the evening. Together they counted. He had never lost one to wolves, he told her, and was proud of that. He loved the new lambs.

“Wash the knife,” Alys directed her, and her thoughts returned to the cottage, where Bryn gasped and gathered herself now as the child emerged. Claire saw it was a girl. She heard it cry as she turned and dipped the knife into the water that simmered on the fire. The blade was hot when she wiped it carefully dry with a clean cloth.

“Don’t cut Bryn!” she implored suddenly.

Alys frowned at her. “No need to cut the mother,” she said brusquely.

She knotted a string around the pulsing cord. The baby waved a fist in the air and wailed. “Sun’s rising,” Alys said to Bryn. “And you’ve got you a fine girl.” She waited a moment, then reached for the knife that Claire held, took it, and separated the newborn from its mother with a careful cut.

Bryn was watching wearily, and smiling. Suddenly Claire stepped forward without thinking, toward the baby that Alys was wrapping now in a cloth, and cried out, “Don’t take it from her!”

Alys frowned. “Take what? What’s troubling you, girl?”

“Give Bryn her baby!”

Alys looked puzzled. She leaned forward and placed the swaddled infant in Bryn’s arms. “And what did you think I was to do, child? Put it out for the wolves? Of course it goes to its mum. Look there. Wee as she is, she knows what to do.”

Like the lamb wobbling forward to suckle, Bryn’s baby turned its head against its mother’s warm skin and its mouth opened, searching. Claire stared at it. Then she began to sob, and stumbled out of the cottage into the dawn. Behind her, Alys, her face folded into puzzlement and concern, began to replace her birthing tools into the woven bag. The new mother dozed while her tiny daughter nuzzled and sucked. Outside, in the distance, the little girls were moving about in the gradually lightening meadow, their arms filled with flowers. But for Claire, who stood on the path weeping, the sunrise, perhaps all sunrises to come, was ruined by memory and loss.

Eight

HALTINGLY, PAUSING TO weep, Claire told her remembered story to Alys. Astonished, the old woman asked to examine her scar. Her gnarled hands touched the raised pink flesh and followed the map of it with one finger.

"Aye," she said, "this is what I saw the day you came, and I knew you'd had a terrible wound. But never did I see until now that it's the size to remove a child. Imagine: to cut a woman like that! Or a girl! You was just a girl! The pain would have been so fierce. It would have killed you."

"No," Claire explained. "I felt nothing when they cut. Before, there was pain—like what Bryn had, with the squeezing of the baby. But when they cut, I felt only pressure. The pushing of the knife. No pain."

Alys shook her head as if in disbelief. "How could that be, then?"

"There were special medicines. Drugs. They took away pain."

"White willow brings relief," Alys murmured. "But not for *cutting!* We have no herbs for that."

"I felt nothing."

"And what of the blood?" Alys again touched the scar. Her finger, its knuckle bent and thickened by age, ran the length of the wound. "I've seen wounds like this. A fisherman caught and ripped apart by the gaff. A hunter clawed and torn open by an animal. I've been called to tend them. But I can do nought but to soothe and comfort. The blood pulses away and they die from it—from the blood and the pain. They scream from the pain and then weaken as the blood flows. Their eyes die first." The old woman's own eyes seemed to look into the distance, thinking of the terrible things she had seen and could not heal.

Claire looked down, herself, at the scar. "I couldn't see. My eyes were covered." She shuddered a bit, as the memory of the mask came to her. "But I felt them cut. And you're right: of course there must have been blood. They had tools, I think, to deal with that. I remember a small sound —"

She thought, and then tried to reproduce it. "*Zzzzt!* And I smelled a burning smell. I think it . . ."

Alys, puzzled, waited for her to continue.

Claire sighed. “They had something that we don’t have here. Electricity. It’s hard to explain. I think they had an electric tool that burned and sealed the blood vessels. *Zzzzt. Zzzzt.*”

Alys nodded, as if it made sense to her. “I burn a wound, sometimes, or a snakebite. I use a firestick. To kill the poison. Not for bleeding, though. Not for a huge wound like this one.”

Claire drew her clothing across the scar, covering it, and the two of them sat together in silence, one with her new and troubling memories, the other puzzling over what had happened to the girl, and why.

“I must find him,” Claire whispered, finally.

“Aye. You must.”

“How?”

Alys stayed silent.

She told Bryn. Watching the woman hold and tend her infant one afternoon, Claire confided in her and described the return of the memories. Bryn listened with shock and sorrow. She clutched her own baby tighter as Claire answered her horrified questions. Neither of them was aware that just outside the cottage, beside the door that had been left partly open for fresh autumn air, the little girls, wide-eyed, were listening.

They scampered away to tell others. “A terrible secret,” Bethan called it, enjoying the attention she received as she retold the embellished story. *Water Claire had had a baby! Yes, young as she was! No, no husband at all. And they took the baby from her—just stole it away, and she never saw it since!*

The secret was murmured throughout the community. Older women lowered their eyes in sympathy; many of them had lost children in cruel ways and they knew what strong, lasting grief came with such a loss. Younger ones, jealous of the pretty stranger, tossed their heads in judgment. *No husband! Wanton thing! We suspected something like that! So she was tossed out of where she lived!*

Glenys, who had welcomed Claire’s attentions at the handfasting ceremony in early summer, now smoothed her skirt smugly over her newly rounded belly. “I’ll have Alys come to midwife me when my time comes,” she said with a toss of her head, “but I don’t want *her.*”

Tall Andras, his face set in hard lines, turned away when he saw her.

“Is something wrong?” Claire asked him, puzzled by his cold look. He had always been so friendly.

“Is it true, what they say?”

“Who? And what is it they’re saying?”

“Everyone. That you’ve had a child. And no husband.”

Claire stared at him. The knowledge was still so new to her that it seemed secret. She had yet to think it all through. It was still fragments, some of it, though from describing it to Alys she remembered the birth now, clearly and with horror. But *child?* She had no sense, yet, of a child. Only something small and newly birthed.

“It was different, where I lived. There weren’t weddings. And yes, I gave birth.” She found herself speaking tersely to him. She was angered. “You can’t understand. I was *selected* to give birth. It was an honor. I was called *Birthmother.*”

He raised his chin and looked at her with a kind of contempt. “You live here, now. And you’re stained.”

“*Stained?* What are you talking about?”

“Women who couple in the field, like animals. They have a stain to them. No one wants them, after.”

Oh. Now she understood what he meant. She had watched the sheep mating. Einar had had to explain it to her, how it created the lambs. He had laughed, finding it strange that she knew nothing of the process.

“That has nothing to do with me,” she told Andras defiantly.

“Or with me,” he said coldly. He turned his back and resumed his stacking of wood. Claire watched for a moment, then continued striding on, but her morning was tainted by the encounter. Later, troubled, she told Alys of it while they were having lunch.

“It’s the way here,” Alys explained. “Foolish, mayhap. But it has always been so. Girls must come to the Handfasting untouched, or pretend to be. Otherwise . . .”

“Otherwise no one wants them?”

Alys shrugged, and chuckled. “People learn to overlook. Sounds to me as if Andras was hopeful to have you. He’ll overlook, with time, if you don’t remind him.”

“Hmmppph.” Claire stood. She fed a piece of spinach to Yellow-wing, who hopped happily back and forth on his perch. Then she scraped the

leavings from the plates into the bucket. “I don’t care about Andras. And I never wish to wed. *You* didn’t,” she pointed out.

Alys grinned. “I was a willful girl,” she said.

“Willful?”

“Some said wild.” Now Alys laughed aloud. “And wanton.”

Claire found that the laughter was making her own anger subside. Looking at Alys, wrinkled and bent, it was hard to imagine her as a willful, wild girl. But in the unrestrained laughter Claire could hear a hint of the carefree creature she must once have been.

The children, curious about what seemed a mystery (for people spoke of it in whispers) but too young to judge her, were open with their questions to Claire. They were on the beach, gathering driftwood to dry for the fireplace. The wind was sharp and snapped at Claire’s skirt.

“Did it grow in your belly, like my mum’s?” Bethan asked.

Claire nodded, resigned to their knowing. She added a bent stick to the pile.

“Were it a boy?” Delwyth’s eyes were wide.

Claire nodded again. “Yes,” she said. “A male.” She startled herself. Why had she called it that? Everyone knew a baby was either a girl, like Bethan’s new sister, or a wee boy. Why had she said that odd word, *male*, as if she had given birth to a creature of woods or fields?

“Where did it go, then, your male?” Solemn little Eira looked worried. “Who took it?”

Claire smiled to reassure the child. “Someone else needed it,” she explained. “Just as your mum needs these pieces of wood! Let’s drag that big one over here and see if we’re strong enough to break it, shall we?”

“I’m strong!”

“Look at me, how strong I am!”

“As strong as a boy! As a male!”

The children strutted and shouted as they ran about in the wet sand. Claire glanced toward the high bank that bordered the beach and saw Einar watching. He balanced a wooden yoke across his wide shoulders, and two buckets hung level from either side. He was coming from the spring where he got fresh water. With his shoulders bearing the weight, he was able still to use his walking sticks. Now, seeing her watching, he lifted one hand and waved to her.

Claire waved back, and smiled. *So,* she thought, *there's one young man who doesn't think me stained. Or is it that I'm now ruined, as he is?*

She watched him make his way along the path, his feet dragging, one after the other. Beside her, in the sand, the laughing children imitated Einar, dragging their feet and limping dramatically, and then watching the furrowed ruts they made fill with seawater and smooth over.

Nine

WINTER DESCENDED SUDDENLY, with bone-chilling cold. The damp, raw wind swept in from the ocean and entered through cracks in the walls of the hut. It made the fire flicker and hiss. Claire wore a thick furred vest that Alys has stitched for her from an animal hide, and warm boots from the same hide, laced with sinew.

She accompanied Alys one morning to Bryn's cottage, where the baby girl, now named Elen, was swaddled in layers of woven cloth and warmed in her cradle by wrapped stones made hot in the fire. Alys chuckled after listening to the shrill cry of the infant. "Summer babies fare better," she told Bryn. "But this one sounds to be strong."

Bryn poured tea into thick mugs. Outside the wind blew, and on the floor near the fire little Bethan, humming tunelessly, sorted acorns into families. Claire excused herself and slipped away.

Outside, she wrapped her shawl tightly over the fur vest and pulled her thick knitted hat down to protect her ears. She started up the hill, following the deserted path as it wound among the wind-tossed trees. No one was about. The cold weather was keeping people indoors. But perhaps, she thought, Einar would be in the meadow, tending his creatures, and would welcome her company. Climbing, she held her mittened hands to her mouth and breathed into them for warmth. Her feet slipped now and then on mud frozen to ice.

It was hard for Claire to understand seasons. Her returning memory had told her nothing of the way the leaves in summer showed their undersides as a storm approached, then withered and dropped when the nights were chill. Now there was the cold, and she could not remember it. She had never had a coat before, or shawl, she was sure of that. And rain! It had been new to her in summer, and now, with the cold, it was mixed with spits of ice, and who was to guess what might follow! Each day came as a surprise, though Alys, realizing, tried to prepare her and explain.

Claire knocked at the door of the wood-slatted shed where Lame Einar lived, but there was no answer. She pushed the door open, peeked in, and saw that the ashes of his fire were still hot; wisps of smoke drifted from

the chimney and disappeared with the wind into the gray sky. He would be up in the field, she knew. She closed the door tight, pulled her shawl closer around her, and climbed the path.

She found him rubbing salve into the leg of a sheep that had caught itself in a thorny bush.

"Here—help hold him still, would you? He keeps pulling away."

Claire wrapped her arms around the neck of the impatient creature and tried to soothe him by murmuring meaningless sounds. "Shhhh, shhhh," she said, as she had heard Bryn whisper to the baby when she cried. She leaned her head against the matted fleece of the sheep's neck. It felt like a pillow, though its smell was strong.

"There." Einar released the leg, and the sheep shook itself and pulled loose from Claire's grasp. It bounded away through the high, dry grass, and she could hear the nasal bleats of greeting from its flock.

He looked at her and said, "You're cold." Claire laughed at him because he had said the obvious. She was shivering, and breathing again into her own cupped, mittened hands. "Come down to my shed," he told her. He looked out over the flock, saw that they were huddled together, heads hunched low, out of the sleet. Then he went down the path and she followed.

She sat on the heap of skins that he used for sleeping while he poked the ashes into a red glow and then added a thick piece of oak branch. She could feel the warmth expand.

"Tell me why you've come out on a foul day like this," he asked her.

She hesitated, uncertain how he would react. Finally she said carefully, "They tell me you climbed out, once."

He glanced over, then turned back to the fire and rearranged it a bit, though it seemed to Claire unnecessary. She thought that perhaps he simply needed to look away.

"Aye. I did," he acknowledged. "Do you want to know the why of it?"

"The how. I want to know the how. I look at the cliff and it looms there, unclimbable."

Einar sighed. He rose with an effort from where he knelt on the ground, then moved over to sit beside her on the skins. They both stared at the fire.

"I best tell you the why, first, so you understand."

Claire nodded, knowing she would need to tell him her own why when the time came.

Spatters of sleet tapped against the roof of the shed. But they were warm inside.

"I never knew my mum," he began. "She died when she birthed me. Alys came, they said, and helped, but I was big and she labored too long, and bled, and she died. It happens sometimes."

Claire nodded. Alys had told her that it did. She remembered how interested Alys had been, hearing her tell her own story, of the cutting. "It be different here," Alys had said.

"My father was a fisherman, and he was out with the boats. It was this time of year, with the cold and the wind. He likely had a bad time of it too. But he was a hard man, my father. Strong. Used to the weather."

He shrugged. "As I am," he added.

"But you're not *hard*, Einar."

"Hardened to the weather, I am. I must be, for the creatures."

She knew he meant his flock of sheep.

"I don't feel the cold as you do," he told her.

"You've always been here. You've learned to live with it."

They sat silently for a moment. Then he began again to talk. "They say he came in from the sea that evening, and emptied his nets and tied his boat. All who saw him fell silent, for no one wanted to be the one to tell him that his son was birthed healthy but his wife was already stiffening and being readied for a coffin."

He looked away. Then he said, "They say he had wanted a son. But not the one what took his wife."

Outside, a branch broke in the wind, skittered across the dooryard of his shed, and slammed against the wall. Claire could picture the fisherman arriving home in weather just like this to find a squalling infant and a wife turned blue and lost.

"It was Alys kept him from flinging me into the fire. Others came and held him down. He roared into the night, they say, cursing all flesh and the wind and the gods, even cursing the sea that be his livelihood.

"He was a hard man to start, they say. My mum, she softened him a bit, but when she was gone he turned to stone. And the stone had an edge to it, sharpened against me, for I had killed her."

"But it wasn't—" Claire began, then stopped. He hadn't heard her.

"Others raised me. Village women. Then, when I was old enough, he tooken me back. Said it was time for me to pay for what I done."

“What did that mean, ‘old enough’? How old were you?”

He thought. “Six years, mayhap? My front teeth had fallen out.”

She shuddered at the thought of a little boy expected to atone for his mother’s death.

“I didn’t know him. It was as if a stranger took me. I went to his cottage, for they said I must, and that night he gave me food and drink, and a blanket to wrap around me as I slept on a pile of straw. In the morning he kicked me awake before it was light and told me he would make a fisherman of me, for I owed him.

“After that, every day, until I was growed, I went with him to the boat and on the boat out onto the sea. He never spoke a soft word. Never told me about the kinds of leaves, or creatures, or pointed to the stars in the sky. Never sang a song to me, or held my hand. Just kicked me across the deck if I be clumsy, laughed when I be twisted in the ropes and sliding pure froze in the water that washed aboard. Slapped me in the head when the sea was rough and I puked over the side. He hoped I would wash overboard and drown. He told me that.

“He made me climb the mast to untangle the lines and he laughed when my hands slid from the salty wood and I fell onto the deck. When I broke my arm he kept me on the sea all day, hauling nets, then sent me to Alys that night and told her to have it fixed by morning or he’d break the other.”

“You should have killed him,” Claire said in a low voice.

He didn’t speak for a moment. Then he said, “I had already killed my mother.”

He stood suddenly, leaning on his stick. He went to the door, cracked it open, and breathed the wind. She was afraid he was going to go out into the bitter cold, that telling her his past had now forced him to punish himself in some way. But after a moment he pulled the door tightly closed and came back. He sat down again, leaning his stick against the wall, and took several deep breaths.

“I growed very strong,” he said.

“I know.”

“I growed taller than my father and so strong, I could have picked him up and flung him into the sea. But I never thought to do that. I stayed silent. I obeyed him. I cooked for him like a wife and washed his clothes and was a wife in other ways too terrible to mention. I made myself into

stone. I willed myself deaf when he cursed me and blind to the look of hatred in his eyes. I waited."

"Waited for what?"

"To be old enough, strong enough, brave enough, to leave. To climb out."

"What went wrong?" she asked him.

"Naught in the climbing out. I trained for it. I was ready. I knew I could do it and I did. It went wrong *after.*" Einar moved one damaged foot slightly, staring at it. His tone was bitter. Then it changed and became more gentle, and curious. "Why do you be asking about this?"

"I must try," Claire told him. "I must try to climb out."

He stared at her. "No woman ever done so," he said.

"I must. I have a child out there. A son. I must find him."

She had known he wouldn't be scornful, for that was not his nature. She had thought, though, that he might laugh at the impossibility of her plan. But he did not. And she realized that he already knew of the child, that he had heard the talk of it.

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "Push against this." He extended his arm toward her, his hand held out upright at if to shove something away.

"Like this?" Claire held her hand up against his.

He nodded. "Push."

She did, summoning her strength to try to move his hand, to bend his arm. It was firm. Rigid. Immobile. Her own arm trembled with her effort. Finally she gave up. Her hand dropped back into her lap. It ached.

Einar nodded. "You're strong, at least in the arms. Can you climb?"

Claire pictured the vertical rock cliff that hung over the village and hid the sun for half the day. She shook her head. "I climb the path up to the meadow where you keep the sheep. You've seen me do it often enough. And sometimes, gathering herbs, I go up into the woods near the waterfall. I never get tired. And it's steep there. But I know that's not what you mean."

"You must start to harden yourself. I'll show you. It won't be easy. You must want it."

"I do want it," Claire said. Her voice broke. "I want *him.*"

Einar paused, and thought, then said, "It be better, I think, to climb out in search of something, instead of hating what you're leaving.

“It will be a long time,” he told her, “to make you ready.”
“I know.”
“Not days or weeks,” he said.
“I know.”
“Mayhap it will take years,” he told her. “For me, it was years.”
“Years?”
He nodded.
“How do I start?” Claire asked.

Ten

"EINAR SAYS I must do this every single day. It strengthens my belly, where the scar is. Watch."

Alys glanced over from the fire, where she was stirring a pot of onion soup. She watched for a moment as Claire, lying on the floor of the hut, wedged her feet under a slab of rock that jutted from the base of the wall, and then lifted the upper half of her body and held herself at a slant, taut, for a moment before she lowered herself slowly back down and took a breath.

"Surely you didn't show that lad your scar?"

"Of course not. But I told him of it." Claire bit her lip, held her breath, and raised herself once again. Then down, slowly. And again.

"There," she said, gasping, after a few moments. "That's ten. He told me to do it ten times every day."

"Here. Have some soup and bread now," Alys told her. "I'll start bottling some strengthening brews for you, as well." She glanced up at the dried herbs hanging from the beams that supported the hut's roof. Claire could hear her murmuring the names—white willow, nettle, meadowsweet, goldenseal—and knew she was pondering what combinations to create.

She had told Alys of her plan. No one else knew.

Claire thought of Alys as the calmest person she knew, the person who had seen the worst of things over her long life and was not surprised or distressed by any of it anymore. Claire had watched her stitch the flesh and wrap an astringent poultice around the leg of a small child gashed by a fall on the slippery rocks, soothing both the terrified mother and the screaming toddler at the same time with her reassuring voice. She had seen her, quiet and commanding, attend the most difficult births, with the babies upside down or sideways and the mum begging for death and the dad puking in the dooryard. Claire had been there at deaths—Andras's mother from fever and cough; a fisherman with his skull crushed by a broken mast; a young boy racked by fits from the day of his birth, finally at five dead with foam on his lips and his eyes rolled back to white. Alys had tended them, tended their families, weighted the eyelids and folded

the arms, then returned to the hut to wash her tools, cook supper, and wait for the next frantic villager who would come to the door begging for help.

She had never seemed alarmed—until the day Einar and Claire told her that Claire must climb out.

"That canna be," she had said loudly, and began to rock back and forth in her chair as if to try to soothe a deep pain. "Oh, no. Canna! You'll die!"

She turned to Claire fiercely. "You'll die on the cliff. You'll fall and be broken to pieces! I've seen the others who was! And look at him, who was once fleet and sure-footed—look at him now, ruined by climbing out! I'm sorry, Einar, you're a good lad and I loved your mum, but you're bloody ruined by that mountain and I won't have you do it to my girl!"

"It was not the mountain ruined me, Alys," Einar said firmly. Claire, listening, was startled by the sudden sureness of him. He had always been so shy and halting in his speech. But now he spoke with certainty to Alys. "I strengthened myself for it and did it. I climbed out. It was *after.* And I'll teach her of that. But for now I'll make her strong. That's how we're starting, and we need you to help, Alys, for she wants her son and must have a way to find him."

"Boat," Alys wailed. "She can go forth on the sea, surely, if she must go."

"No. Not by sea. I won't." As much as she feared the cliff and the climbing she must learn to do, Claire feared the sea more.

"It's winter now," Alys said to them, weakening a bit. "Mayhap in spring we can toughen her up. The sun, and air. That'll be good for strength."

Einar laughed. "We'll start now, Alys," he said, "and spring will come before we know it. It always does."

It did. Spring came. Through all the months of winter she had, each day, lain on the hut floor, put her hands behind her head, and raised herself. Her scarred abdomen had become tight and smooth, and she no longer breathed hard at the effort.

She told Einar, "I'm ready."

He laughed. They were standing beside the door of the hut, and he told her to run up the hillside path, up to the waterfall, and back down to where he stood.

There was a fine rain falling, as there had been all week. The path was slick with spring mud. Claire made a face.

"It's too slippery."

"It's smooth and dry, if you think on it compared to the mountain."

"Yes, well—"

"Run up it. Grip with your feet."

Claire looked down at her own feet, encased in thick wool socks under her coarse leather sandals.

"Take them off," Einar said.

Claire sighed and obeyed. She pulled her sandals off, and the socks. The ground was very cold, still. Spring was young and the drizzle was chilly. She wiggled her toes into the cold, wet earth, to get the grip, and then began to run.

The path steepened partway up and she slipped, scraping her knee on a rock. She righted herself and now her hands were thick with mud and a red trickle of blood patterned her leg. Catching her breath, she eyed the wet path above; then she took a breath and continued. *Run,* Einar had said. She had climbed this path often before, but always slowly, placing her feet carefully. Now she ran. She tried to dig her toes into the ground, but they slid and she fell again and righted herself again. By the time she reached the top of the hill and stood by the rushing waterfall, she found herself in tears. She was coated in mud, shaking with cold, and her knee was swollen and sore. From where she stood, she could see him below, looking up, watching her. She hoped he couldn't see her crying.

"Now down!" she heard him call.

Sliding partway, grasping tree roots to keep from falling, she stumbled down the treacherous path to the bottom. She wiped her tearstained face with muddy hands and hurried to where Einar was waiting.

"Good," he told her. "Now do it again."

Each day through the summer she ran the hill path. On fine days, the mist of the falls made rainbows, and she began to smile when she reached that place, instead of weeping as she had the first time. It began to feel not easy, but doable. She began to come down grinning and proud.

Einar grinned back at her. "You're growing strong," he said, then added, "for a girl."

She glanced at him and saw that he was teasing her. His look was fond. He turned away quickly and tried to hide the fondness, but Claire knew. She had seen him look that way at a half-grown lamb prancing in the meadow on a midsummer afternoon, admiring its agile charm. She had seen him look that way at her, and knew there was a longing to his gaze.

When she felt she had mastered the path, he made it harder. He tied her hands together so that she couldn't use them to steady herself. When the spring moisture had dried, the path became gritty and treacherous in a different way. She couldn't grip it with her toes. When she fell, bruising her shoulder because she couldn't break the fall with her tethered hands, he taunted her. When she wept, he ignored her. She dried her tears and ran.

One afternoon Bryn, her baby in a sling on her chest, stopped by the hut to get a remedy for a spider bite on her ankle. Alys and Claire looked at the hot, swollen sore. "Comfrey root oil," Alys told her. "I have it here. Sit while I heat it."

Bryn handed little Elen to Claire. "I'll take her outside," Claire said, and she carried the sturdy, curly-headed girl to the dooryard to show her some black-eyed Susans in bloom.

Einar appeared. He came every day now, if Claire didn't run to the sheep meadow and meet him there.

"It's Bryn's baby," she told him. "Isn't she sweet?" She handed a picked flower to Elen, who grasped it in a fist and waved it in the air.

"Run with her," Einar said.

Claire was startled, but she laughed. Then, holding the baby, she ran around the small dooryard. Elen waved her arms in delight.

"Let me feel her weight." Einar took the baby from Claire. She could see that he had no experience with a human infant, though he was sure and facile with lambs. She watched as with his large hands under her, Einar assessed how heavy Elen was.

"You must start running with weight," he said, and handed the baby back. "I'll bring it tomorrow."

The next day he was back with a crude leather sack half filled with rocks. He tied it to Claire's back and told her to run the hill path. She did so, and arrived panting at the waterfall. She was tempted to throw a few of the rocks into the rushing torrent, to ease the burden for the run back down. But she didn't. She ran with the weight, and then ran the path again, and found that her breathing changed, to accommodate the heaviness.

After a few runs, the longer breaths she needed came naturally, and it was as if she had always carried it. Alys told her that it was the way of women, to tote a newborn and then adjust as it grew until by the time the child was plump and heavy, the weight seemed naught. Einar left a pile of rocks beside the base of the path and told her to add one more to the sack each day.

Her legs grew muscled and firm. She showed him, one day, how strong and sure they had become. He felt where she showed him, pressing his large hand against the taut, smooth skin above her ankle, and nodded. Then he left his hand there, encircling her leg, and they looked at each other for a moment before he took it away. She felt his fondness again, and her own for him, and the futility of it for them both. She could not stay here.

One morning Einar set a thick log on end. It reached to her knee.

"Step up on that," he said.

She reached for his hand, needing it for support, but he backed away. Claire checked the log to be certain it was firm on the ground. Then she measured the height with her eyes, raised one leg up, placed it on the top of the log, shifted her weight, and picked up her other foot. But she lost her balance and fell back.

"Try again."

All afternoon she stepped onto and down from the log. At first she held her arms wide, using them for balance. Then Einar approached with the coarse rope he had used to restrain her hands on the steep path.

"Wait," she told him. "I don't need my arms tied." Firmly she held her own hands at her sides. Wobbling at first, she tested herself again and again until without moving her arms she could maintain her balance as she mounted the log.

"Good," he said. The next day he brought a higher, narrower log.

Winter came. Outdoors, she ran and climbed on ice. He began to teach her to use a rope, to knot it and twirl it and fling it so that it caught on a rock or a branch. At first it caught things at random. Then, after a bit, she found she could aim with the noose of the rope, that she could choose a log or a bush and catch it precisely on most of her attempts. Then he made the noose smaller. He directed her to capture smaller things: a seedling pine reaching upward from a crevice; a stone balanced on a tree stump. He took away the thick, coarse rope and gave her a thin, woven cord that whistled

when she spun it out into the cold air and snapped a twig with its tiny noose.

Inside the hut, in a corner that Alys had cleared for her, she walked back and forth on a piece of rope stretched taut between two posts, her toes gripping the rope, her breath even, her eyes focused, her arms at first stretched for balance, and then, as spring approached, her hands at her side and her movement steady and controlled. She walked the rope forward and backward. She stood on it still as a post: on one leg, then the other. Slowly she bent one knee, lowered herself, remained there poised, then rose again.

Yellow-wing twittered and pranced on his perch, excited as he watched her. Alys, watching, held her breath and then gasped at each new move.

But Claire was calm. She felt strong. She felt ready.

"Now?" she asked Einar.

Einar shook his head. "Next, we begin to strengthen your arms," he said.

By the following spring, Bryn's baby, Elen, was sturdy and walking. Bryn was expecting another and hoped for a boy. Bethan, Delwyth, and Eira were tall now, with long legs and secrets that made them whisper and giggle.

Most of the village had lost interest in Claire. She was no longer new and mysterious. The scandal of her child was forgotten; there had been more recent disgraces—a woman who took up with her sister's husband, a fisherman who was caught stealing from his own brother. The villagers took little note of Claire's odd new hobby; the hill paths were not visible, and Alys's hut was separate.

She continued her everyday chores, helping with the gathering of plants, accompanying Alys to births and deaths. Sometimes Alys sent her alone to tend a simple cough or fever or rash. The old woman was increasingly bent over, and her walking now was slow. Her eyesight was dimmed. She needed more rest.

Claire teased her gently and told her that she should train to climb out. "Look how strong Einar has made me!" she said, and held out her bare arm, tightening the muscles with pride.

Each evening, after she had cleaned up the hut from dinner and while Alys sat knitting in her rocker, Claire took up her position, lying on her side on a mat near the wall, and breathed deeply. Then, legs straight, she

raised her body on one arm, held herself there, hovering, and then eased herself slowly down. Again and again. First one arm. Then the other.

Her sack of rocks was so heavy now that an ordinary person groaned, trying to lift it. But for Claire it was easy. She swung it onto her back each day and wore it while she tended the garden or gathered the herbs. She ran up and down the hill path with the sack on her back and another in her arms. Steep, rutted places that had once made her stumble and slip were now familiar and easy.

He had her run the path at night. Things felt different in the dark. She trained her feet and hands to know the shapes of things and her mind to sense when she neared an edge and must back away lest she fall.

He wanted to blindfold her so that she could practice the dark in daytime. But she said no.

"I'll do it at night, even in the middle of the night, when there's no moon and when it's bitter cold. But I can't have something tied over my eyes. It's like being on the sea. It's a fearsome memory that I can't—"

She turned away and couldn't finish. But he seemed to understand. "You must learn the dark, though," he told her. "Part of the climbing out will be in dark. You'll start before the sun comes up."

"Why?"

"It's too long a climb to do it all in daylight. If you wait and go at dawn, at sunup, then the dark part will come near the top. You'll be making your way up and around places where a mistake will bring death on you. I'll teach you to feel every bit with your feet, but even so you'll need your eyes as you near the top."

Together they looked up at the shadowy cliff. Claire had to lean back to see the top. Mist swirled there and she could see hawks circling.

He had said he would teach her to feel with her feet, and after some time she became aware, amused by it, that even her toes were supple now. With astonishment she realized that she could perceive the smallest of pebbles —and pick them up, if need be, with individual toes. She could grasp a twig between the third and fourth toe of her left foot, or carefully feel her way around the sharp edge of a flat rock by her right big toe, which was as sensitive now as a fingertip.

She told this to Einar with delight. "Imagine that!" she said. "Toes!" He nodded in agreement but looked sad.

"What's wrong?" she asked him.

But he turned away and didn’t reply. Guiltily she realized it had been cruel to be so gleeful over the strength and agility of her feet to someone who had lost his own.

Eleven

TWINS! TWO BOYS with bright red hair. Bryn, exhausted as she was, lay laughing at the surprise and the sight of them. Claire held one in each arm and then laughed herself as she realized she was raising and lowering them slightly, the same way Einar had her raise and lower heavy rocks to strengthen her forearms.

It was almost winter again. She moved Yellow-wing's cage indoors. It had hung all summer and into autumn from a tree branch in the dooryard. Now, in the warmth, he fluffed his wings and chirped. Bethan was there, and Elen. Their mother needed quiet to tend her two new boys, and sent the girls off to amuse themselves. Now little Elen, squatting on the floor, twisted twigs into a bird shape and pretended she had made a wife for Yellow-wing. Bethan was busily helping Alys sort some dried herbs to be packed into bags and stored. Claire, watching, realized that Alys was beginning to teach the young girl in the same way that she had taught Claire for these past years. The village would need someone to take Alys's place. It was clear that it could not be Claire.

She wrapped her hands around the thick branch that Einar had peeled and set firmly in place above the door. She lifted herself up until her chin was level with the peeled wood. She hung poised there and counted to ten, then lowered herself slowly. Doing this still hurt. That meant she needed it. She must do this each day until it stopped hurting. Then, she knew, Einar would tell her to put on her backpack filled with rocks and begin doing it again.

Briefly, on a day when she was exhausted, she thought of Einar with frustration, of how demanding he was, how relentlessly he made her do the exercises again and again. Then she thought of how he watched her, assessing and admiring her strength, and she knew that his gaze was also that of someone who loved her.

Tall Andras had married in midsummer, his new wife a fresh-faced, quick-smiling young girl named Maren. Standing at the ceremony, Claire felt no sadness; she had never wanted to be his wife. But once he had hoped for it, and now he had moved on and seemed happy. She thought

sadly of Einar, alone in his hillside hut, and knew that a part of life was passing both of them by.

"Soon?" she asked Einar, after she showed him how she could hold herself raised on the branch with her arms taut and unshaking, even while wearing the sack of rocks at its heaviest. He ignored her question.

"One arm now," he said. While he watched, she struggled to lift herself with just one. He wanted her arms to be equally strong on both sides, as her legs now were. On either leg she could hop up onto a rock slippery with damp moss and stand balanced there with the other tucked up like a waterbird. After rain she could slide, standing on one foot, down the steep muddy path and stop herself at any point by pressure on her heel or toes.

She could hold a pebble on her raised foot and then move it by concentrating on it until it was between two toes, then under. From there she could move it from toe to toe, under and over. It made little Elen laugh uproariously to watch and then try the same feat with her own chubby toes.

"Why do I need to spend time learning foolish tricks?" Claire asked Einar. "This seems a waste."

"It won't be. It's important. You'll see."

She was eager to go. She had waited such a long time.

But she had come to trust Einar, his wisdom and caring, deeply. So she sighed and nodded.

In the winter she slept beside Alys. When the fire died late one night, with wind howling outside, the old woman shivered and Claire embraced her, trying to send warmth from her own body into the frail limbs that could no longer hold on to their own heat.

"You're a good girl," Alys murmured. "Your own mum must miss you fierce."

Claire was startled. When she tried, in response to Alys's words, to think of her mother, there was little that came forth. Parents. Yes. She had had parents. She could remember their faces, and could even recall the sound of their voices. But there was little else.

"No," she told Alys. "I don't think she loved me."

Alys turned in the bed and through the dim light of the last embers that glowed in the fireplace, Claire could see her bright eyes, open in surprise. "How could that be, child?"

Claire chuckled and hugged her. “I’m not a child anymore, Alys. Maybe I was when you found me. I was a young girl, then. But so much time has passed, Alys. I’m a woman now.”

“To me you’re a child, still. And a mum always loves her child.”

“It should be so, shouldn’t it? But something stood in the way of it. I think it was a—well, they called them *pills.* The mothers took pills.”

“Pills?”

“Like a potion.”

“Ah.” That was something Alys understood. “But a potion is meant to fix an ill.”

Claire yawned. She was achy and exhausted.

“My people—” (“My people”? What did that mean? She didn’t really know) “They thought that it fixed a lot of ills, not to have feelings like love.”

“Fools,” Alys muttered. Now she yawned too. “You loved your boy, though. That’s why you’re soon to climb out.”

Claire closed her eyes and patted the old woman’s back. “I did,” she said. “I loved my boy. I still do.”

Twelve

IN LATE SPRING, Tall Andras had a plump newborn son, and there were lambs prancing in the upper meadow, their soft fleece warm in the changed, gentler weather. Early wildflowers were in bloom, and lavender butterflies with lacy-patterned wings darted from one to the next. Bryn's twin boys grinned and showed two teeth apiece. The fishermen folded freshly knotted nets they had mended in winter while their wives, beside them at the fire, made the sweaters they would wear on their boats.

Even the wind seemed new. It wasn't the same brutal wind that had ripped the roof thatch and swirled the snow. Now it pulled the warm scent of brine-washed sea urchins, mussels, and kelp from the rocks and carried it gently across the beach and up the hill. It lifted Claire's long curls as she knelt and filled a basket with nettles. The rigid stems and heart-shaped leaves were covered with stiff hairs that were painful to touch, but she was wearing the special protective gloves Alys had made. The plant would be a valuable pain reliever for Old Benedikt, who was suffering from gout.

"Don't touch," she warned Bethan, who had come with her and wanted to help. "It stings. You gather the elder bark, over there. Your mum needs it for your brothers."

Bethan peeled bits of the bark and added it to the basket. The twins were fussy from teething.

"When I leave, you'll be in charge of the gathering, then. Alys will make gloves for you. You must be careful with these nettles."

Bethan hung her head.

"Do you think you can't do it? You've learned so much," Claire reassured her.

"I can do it. But I don't want you to leave."

"Ah, Bethy." Claire hugged the slender girl. "You know why I must go."

"To find your baby." Bethan sighed. "Yes, I know."

"Not a baby anymore. He's a boy now. If I don't go soon to find him, he'll be a man!"

"I fear for you, Claire." Bethan's voice was low.

"Why is that? You know how strong I am. Look!" Claire reached up with one arm and grasped a limb of the elder tree. She raised herself until

she balanced, unwavering, from the one muscled arm. Then, slowly, she lowered herself back to the ground. “Not even your pa can do that, can he?”

Bethan smiled slightly. “No. And Pa’s getting fat, too, Ma says.”

“You mustn’t fear for me, then. You can see that I’m strong, and swift, and . . .”

“Smart, and sly, and . . .” Bethan giggled. It was a game they often played, with the sounds of words.

“And silly!”

“And sleepy!”

“And slugbucket!”

“Swatbottom!”

As it always did, their word game dissolved into nonsense and they laughed as they carried the basket back down the hill.

Time passed quickly now. The seasons flowed into one another and Claire was no longer surprised as the changes came. Like the other villagers, she bundled herself against the increasing cold as each winter approached, and welcomed each new spring. The growth of the children made her aware of time passing. Bethan and her companions were no longer giggling, exuberant children; they were becoming taller, quieter, preparing for womanhood to come. Elen, no longer a baby, was the small, mischievous one now, playing the imaginative games that her sister once had. The redheaded twin boys scuffled and scampered together while Bryn, their mother, fretted over their misbehavior and laughed at their antics.

Each spring the snow melted and Claire took Yellow-wing’s cage outside to hang it once again from the tree. Each fall, when the wind swept in from the sea and the leaves fell rustling on the ground, she brought her little companion into the cottage once again.

“How long will he live?” she asked Einar one day when she was feeding the bird. Suddenly she was aware that each life had a beginning and an end.

“Birds have a long life. He’ll be here to keep Alys company when you be gone.”

Claire glanced at him. He had not mentioned it in a long time, the fact of her leaving. He tested her strength, still, and kept her working at it, but he had not spoken of the climbing out for many months. It had been six

years now since the day she had been carried in from the sea, and five since the morning that Elen's birth returned the memory of her son to her. Somewhere he would be a half-grown boy: running, shouting, playing.

Einar saw her questioning look.

"Soon," he told her.

With summer approaching, plants coming into flower, and Alys in need of more help as her strength began to ebb, there was a great deal to do. The daily exercise had long been part of Claire's routine. She rose before dawn each day and lifted sacks weighted with stones many times with each arm before she put the kettle over the fire. Then, while she waited for the water to boil for tea, she practiced the lifting of her legs, and the raising of her upper body as she lay flat. She could now do these things with great ease. It made her laugh to remember how difficult they had been when she started. Now she tied heavy rocks to her ankles and wrists but still performed the familiar motions without effort.

She cleaned Yellow-wing's cage as she did each morning. It had been raining for some days, but now the rain seemed to have ended; it was a simple cloudy spring morning. She carried the cage outside and hung it from the willow tree beside the hut. She whistled and chirped back at the bird, who was excited at being outdoors. Then she heard a familiar answering whistle and turned to greet Einar, who was approaching from the meadow path.

"Alys baked bread yesterday," she told him cheerfully. "And she made extra. We have a loaf ready for you."

"Look at the sky," Einar said.

She did. Above the looming cliff, the pale wadded clouds reminded her of Einar's sheep when, after the snowmelt, they still huddled for warmth but with heads down moved across the meadow nibbling at new shoots. But somehow she knew that wasn't what he meant.

"What?"

"There's sun behind. The rain's done for a while."

Those who tended stock, like Einar, or who farmed, like Andras, or all of the village fishermen—they knew the sky. Claire nodded cheerfully at what he said. "Good. I can do the washing and hang it out on the bushes."

"No," Einar said. "No more washing. It's time to climb out."

Thirteen

THERE WERE STILL stars visible in the night sky. A sliver of spring moon was low, just above the quiet-moving sea. In the meadow, the huddled sheep were silent. The only sound was the rush of water from the falls above, through the woods to the side.

They stood there together. Then Claire said, “I’m sorry for what happened to you.”

“Aye. I know.”

He had told her, at last, how he had been damaged. It was worse than she could have imagined. But she knew she must not think of it now. When she reached the top would be the time. She would have to plan, then, and what he had revealed to her would be part of her planning. But for now she must concentrate only on the climb.

“He’ll be there at the top, do you think?”

“Not at first. You’ll wait there and he’ll come. Don’t think on it now.”

“But I will know him?”

“Aye. You will.”

“Do you think I’ll make it, Einar?”

“You will.” He laughed and touched her cheek. “I’ve given you what’s been in my mind for all these years, since I climbed out. Every night since then I’ve climbed out again. I’ve felt again each rock, each bit of moss, each twig and hollow and cleft and turn: at night, when other men are mending their nets or sharpening their tools or making love to their women—I’ve been remembering the climbing. I have a map in my mind and I’ve given it to you and you’ll be safe.”

He chuckled and hugged her. “You must. If you don’t, I’ll be made a fool of, for I was the one what made you strong! Let me see your pack now, to make it tight against you.”

Claire knelt on the path at the base of the cliff while Einar leaned his walking sticks against the rock wall and adjusted the pack on her back.

“Knife?” he asked her.

She showed him how it was firmly knotted onto the cord that hung around her neck.

“Rope?”

It was coiled neatly and wrapped around her shoulder.

"The water gourd's in your pack. Don't try to reach it when you're on the rock, even if you thirst fierce. There are places where you can stop and rest. Ledges, they're called. If you climb steady you'll reach the first one at midday. You can stop to drink there."

"Yes, I know. You told me."

"What's this?" He was feeling her pack. "Down by the water gourd, with the gloves?"

"Alys put that in. Herb salve for healing."

"Aye, that's good. Mayhap when you use the rope, you'll burn your hands, even with the gloves. If you slip on the rope, it pulls against your skin. But don't let go."

"I won't. You know I won't."

"Don't put on the gloves lessen you use the rope. You need to feel with your fingers."

"Einar?"

"What?"

She showed him. "Alys made this. You can't see it because it's too dark, but feel."

She handed him the flat, round object and waited while he felt it.

"It's just an ordinary rock. But Alys sewed a piece of cloth around it. It's bright red. She made it from the woolen hat I wore last winter."

"Whyever?"

"When I get to the top? You told me there's a very steep place just before. The place I must be so careful . . ."

"Aye, the place with the rock steps. Don't look down."

"No, I won't. I'll do it just the way you told me, feeling for each step, being so careful, not looking down, not being gleeful because it's the top."

"What, then?"

"When I finish climbing all those steps and am at the top, and feel my feet in the solid earth? Then I'll fling this rock out into the air and down."

"The sun will be setting."

"Yes. I'll fling my rock out into the sunset. You look tomorrow. Look on the ground down here for the bright red. Then you'll know that I did it. That I climbed out."

"Aye. I'll look. It'll be a sign."

He touched her cheek and held his hand there tenderly for a moment. “I will miss you, Water Claire,” he said.

“I will never forget you, Fierce Einar,” she replied.

They both smiled at the long-ago names. Then he kissed her, turned away, and reached for his sticks. She would not see him again. It was time for her to start.

The base of the cliff was large boulders, some of them slippery with damp moss on their shadowed sides. They were easy for her to climb; she had practiced here occasionally, after dark. So her feet (bare, though her sandals were in her pack for later) knew the feel and shape of them. But it would be too easy to dismiss the dangers even of this familiar beginning place. A slip on the moss, a misplaced step, a turned ankle, and her mission would end before it began. So she reminded herself to be vigilant. She focused on each move, placing each foot meticulously, feeling the surface with her toes, assessing the texture, shifting her weight before she took the next step. Once she jostled a small rock in passing and sent a shower of stones clattering down. She scolded herself for that. It was a small misjudgment and caused no harm. But she could not afford a single mistake this day.

Einar had told her to think of nothing during the climb but the climb itself. But now and then, during this early section that she could maneuver with ease, she found her thoughts straying from the cliff. *If only,* the voice in her mind whispered. *What if.*

If only I had taken the baby that day. What if I had brought my little son here, and he could have grown up with Einar teaching him about the birds, and the lambs . . .

He would have died in the sea. She shuddered, thinking of it.

What if Einar had not tried to climb out? What if he had stayed whole? Then he and I could go together, and find my son, and . . .

She willed her thoughts to stop. *Concentrate,* she told herself. *Concentrate only on the cliff. On the climb.*

There were plants here, in places where wind-borne seeds had dropped into the rocky crevices and been nourished by melted snow, sprouting now in this early spring, their stems reaching up. By daybreak she would be able, perhaps, to see them move as they sought the sun. Now, in the dark,

she could only feel them there, tendrils brushing against her bare legs. She tried not to trample their fragile growth.

Ah. Here. This was why Einar had told her not to let her thoughts wander. Here was the place he had described, where suddenly, in this massed section of boulders, was a rift, a deep gap in the rocks, a place where she must jump to the next foothold. He knew it would still be dark when she reached it.

"Why don't we go there now, in daylight, just for practice?" she had asked him. "Then I'll know exactly the length of the jump, and—Oh." She caught herself, realizing that it would be impossible for him. He struggled each day, making his way with difficulty down from the sheep pasture in order to teach and help her. He could not scramble up this mass of uneven rocks.

But he had helped her to create the practice place. He measured the distance and height; they built the shapes from mud and let it harden. She jumped it again and again. It was not difficult. She was to leap from the top of a jagged boulder across the gap to a flat granite surface. He had her do it repeatedly on moonless nights, so that she could not see, and she began to feel the distance so accurately that her feet found the same landing place every time.

"You'll come to a place where you must squeeze betwixt two rocks as high as your shoulder. Matched. Same size, like Bryn's boys," he had told her. "When you get yourself through—mind you don't catch your pack in the squeeze—then you go upward to the top of the next rock. It slants up, and there's a sharp edge you'll feel. That's where you plant yourself, on that edge, and jump outward and down."

It was just as he had described. The twin rocks were as high as her chin, and the space between them narrow. Carefully she used her hands and felt the surface all the way down each one, to make sure there would be no rough places to scrape and injure her as she squeezed herself between them in the dark. Then, arching her back to accommodate the lumpy pack —it would be a disaster should her water gourd be crushed—she slid through.

The next rock was what she expected, a sharp upward slant with jagged outcroppings. She mounted it inch by inch, avoiding the daggerlike places that might gash her soles. She used her trained toes like fingers, feeling the way. It was slow going because she took such care. It was what he had

taught her to do. Finally she reached the top of the slant, the sharp edge where he had instructed her to plant her feet for the jump. She balanced there, took a deep breath, recalled in her mind the feel of the distance she must cover, then made the leap into darkness with certainty. She landed on the flat granite, balanced perfectly. It had been her first challenge, really, and a small one. But even the small ones could be disastrous if they went wrong, and it was satisfying to have it behind her. She took her water gourd from the pack, sipped, and rested there for a moment, thinking through the next part of the climb. On the horizon, looking out across the sea, she could see a thin pink line of dawn emerge.

Fourteen

MIDDAY. THE SUN was directly overhead now. Claire could see, below her, that the tops of the trees were moving slightly. So there was a bit of a breeze. But it didn't reach here. She wiped sweat from her forehead and pushed her damp hair back. She retied the cord that held it bunched at her neck, then wiped her sweaty hands carefully on the woven cloth of her garment. She could not afford the least slip of her hand on the rock face of the cliff. Earlier, farther down, she might have recovered from a falter or stumble, might even have bound up a twisted ankle and continued on. But here, now, an instant of missed footing or a lost grip on a handhold would mean certain death. She blew on her hands and dried them again.

She was balanced now on a narrow ledge. Einar had told her she would reach this place at midday and it would be safe to stop here and drink from her gourd. She had done so already, once, at dawn, on the lower rocks, when it was still easy to stand and rearrange her pack. Here it was much more difficult. The hours of learning balance were helping her now. Turned sideways on the ledge that was no wider than her two feet side by side, she wriggled the pack around so that she could reach in and grasp the gourd. She held it carefully with both hands while she drank, then replaced it and withdrew the gloves from the pack. She would need them next.

If she had needed her arms for balance on this precarious perch, she would not have been able to drink. But her body needed the water, and he had prepared her for this. After she moved the pack again to its place between her shoulders, she stood with her legs steady and firm and pulled a glove onto each hand. Then slowly she uncoiled the rope.

It was amazing, really, that having made this climb only once—then down again, so perhaps that counted as twice; but he was injured then, and could hardly have been memorizing the ledges and grasping places—Einar had been able to recreate it for Claire. She imagined him alone in his hut, all those years, making the climb again in his mind, creating the map of it night after night.

Here you must stop and look carefully ahead and slightly up, for the next hold.

At this place there is loose rock. It deceives. Do not place your foot on the ledge here. It won't hold.

A gull has nested here. Feel under the nest, through the twigs. There's a place to grasp.

Use the rope here.

Feel with your toes now.

Don't look down.

She was now at the place where he had said to use the rope. She must find the spot up and ahead where a gnarled tree jutted from a slice in the rock face. There would be a small ledge beneath it. Between here, where she stood balanced on this ledge, and the one below the tree, was nothing she could grip or hold. So she must capture the tree with the noose of her rope and use it to get across the wide expanse of vertical rock.

She formed and knotted the noose. Across and above, she saw the stunted tree. She measured it with her eyes, to know how large the noose should be. Einar had said it may have grown in the years since he had done this. She might have to make a large noose, he had told her, to whirl it over the crooked branches, then tighten it around the twisted trunk.

But she could see from here that it had not grown at all. Instead, it was blackened, and one of the branches hung crooked and dead, split from the trunk. *Lightning,* Claire thought. *It has been struck by lightning.*

She tried to see where the roots emerged from the rock. Were they split as well? Would they hold? But they were hidden from her sight by a thick knob on the trunk itself.

He had warned her not to look down here. She was tempted to do so, in order to know what would happen if the tree failed her, if it broke from her weight and she fell. But she could hear his voice: *Think only on the climb. Think on what you control.*

She could not control the tree, or its blackened, split trunk. She could not control the strength of the gnarled roots that held it to the cliff.

But he had taught her how to control her body: her arms, her hands, her fingers, her feet and legs. And with them she could control the rope. She let it out, looping between her gloved hands, until it seemed the length was right. Then she began to twirl the noose. She had practiced this with Einar so often.

Now. She sent it loose and the loops unwound between her gloves as the rope shot out like a snake she had once seen unwind itself in pursuit of a

mouse frozen in terror. The snake had killed the mouse in a split second. Claire's aim was just as accurate, but she had made the noose too small. It caught the end of the tree but didn't encircle it entirely; it was caught in the Y of a small forked branch.

She jerked at the rope and to her relief the twig on which it was caught snapped and the rope fell loose. She brought it in, hand over hand, and coiled it again. She remade the noose, slightly larger this time, and looped it for a second time between her gloved hands.

She called back the image of the snake: its eyes, its aim, the swift accuracy of its strike. One more time she twirled the rope and sent it out. This time, snakelike in its precision, it encircled the tree.

Claire tightened the noose, pulling it in close around the trunk by its base near the rock wall. Then, still balanced on the tiny ledge where she stood, she knotted the rope around her own waist. Her next move must be to leave the ledge, to steady herself with the taut rope and walk herself across the expanse of vertical veined granite, feeling for tiny protrusions to grasp with her bare toes. If the tree uprooted and fell, she would fall with it and die.

Think only on the task. On the climb.

She reached out with a foot, pressed it into the wall, and anchored it there. She tightened her grip on the rope and lifted her second foot from the ledge. For a breathless moment she dangled there in space. Then she placed her foot on the wall and steadied herself. The tree was holding. She moved her first foot an inch, then another. The tree still held. She tightened the rope, moved her second foot, and then the first again. She took in more rope through her gloved palms as she moved herself slowly across.

When at last she reached the small ledge below the tree and felt her feet firmly in place there, she took a deep breath. From here she would go upward though a diagonal crevice, but there would be footholds—she could see the first ones just above her—and at the top, another resting place. With difficulty she pulled the rope loose from the tree and rewound it. There was no way to return her gloves to her pack here on this tiny precarious place, so she fixed them under the rope on her shoulder. Then she reached up for the first wedge of rock and lifted herself by one arm into the crevice.

It was cooler here in the shadows. She realized she was getting tired. And it was only early afternoon. There was still a long way to go.

It took Claire longer than she had expected to make her way through the narrow shadowed tunnel that the crevice had formed. It was not life-threatening, as the rope-assisted passage across the cliff face had been. There was no sheer drop here. She was moving upward at a slant between two walls of rock. It was cool, which helped, for it had been very hot on the cliff face, and the sun had made it hard to see at times, shimmering as it did on the granite. Here, it was hard to see for the opposite reason: the shadowy darkness that made it cool. But it was like the night climbing at the bottom. She did it by feel.

The chill had also made it wet. Snowmelt had seeped into the rock tunnel, and the small opening had not allowed the sun in to evaporate the water. So the rock walls were damp and slippery. Twice Claire's fingers slid loose from their holds and she went backwards, sliding down into the space she had just climbed through. She wiped her hands firmly again on her clothing, but the fabric too was now soaked through. Finally she thought to put on the gloves that she had wedged under her coiled rope. But when she pulled at them, there was only one. The other glove had slipped free and fallen someplace. For a moment she despaired. Then she remembered what Einar had told her: When something went wrong—*and it's sure that something will*, he had said—you stopped to think, then found a way around it.

She lay at a slant in the tunnel, holding herself there with her legs taut against the walls, and thought. Then she put the remaining glove on her right hand, turned, grasped the next handhold, the one she had slipped from, and held herself there. The glove made it easier. It was thick and coarse. Even damp, it held fast. So she was secure for the moment. She worked her legs up an inch at a time, on either side, until they held her.

Then slowly, carefully, she took the glove off, put it on her other hand, and reached up farther for the next handhold. She grabbed, held on, and began again to inch her legs up. In the darkness she felt the wall with her ungloved hand, trying to find the next holding place; when she had found it, she carefully switched the glove again so she could hold fast. It was painstakingly slow, but she was moving upward instead of sliding down. Far up and ahead she could see the sunny opening where she would emerge

back onto the side of the cliff. This, she remembered, was where she would find a large nest. She was to reach under the thick twiggy construction for a place to grasp. From there she would move onto a series of outcroppings that formed something almost like steps.

"Nest. Steps. Nest. Steps." She began to murmur the two words, giving them a sort of rhythm that helped her move upward and forward. It gave her something to focus on as she continued the agonizingly slow ascent between the dark, damp walls.

Fifteen

EMERGING FROM THE tunneled cleft in the cliff wall, Claire was once again faced with the sheer drop of it, the certain death if she were to fall. Just in front of her, she was reassured to see the large nest that Einar had told her she would find. She caught her breath, then stretched forward and pulled loose some dried seaweed that formed part of its construction. She used it to dry her perspiring hands, then tucked it into her sleeve.

Reach under the nest, he had told her. *There's a place to grab on to, there.*

She began to follow his instructions, leaning against the cliff toward the nest. *Nest. Then steps.*

The attack was swift, painful, and without warning. From behind and above, something huge swooped and stabbed her viciously behind her ear. She could feel the blood flow down her neck.

She retreated with a gasp back into the tunnel, supporting herself with her feet pressed against the side walls. She held the wad of seaweed against her wound but could feel the blood pulsing.

Immediately she understood what she was facing. Einar had made the climb in winter. The nest had been empty then. Now there must be new chicks. Yes. She listened and could hear the tiny squawking cries. Peering out, she could see the shadow of the parent gull, circling.

The neck of her shirt was wet with it, but the flow of blood gradually eased. Tentatively she lifted the homemade bandage. Good. The wound was only oozing. The sharp pain had subsided. She knew that she would be bruised and sore later, but that was not a concern now. Her urgent need was to figure out how to get past the nest, using its important handhold, and to the steplike rock protrusions that would be the means of her final ascent to the top.

After testing her legs and feet against the walls to be certain her perch was secure and she wouldn't slip back down into the tunnel, Claire reached back into her pack and took out her water gourd. She drank deeply. Then she remembered the healing salves that Alys had placed in the bottom of the pack. If she returned the gourd, she wouldn't be able to reach the medicine. But she had no place to put the water container. She shook it,

and realized there was little water remaining. Finally, knowing there was a risk in this, she gulped the remaining liquid and dropped the empty gourd into the tunnel she had just climbed through. She could hear its single hollow thud against the wall as it fell, and then silence.

Now she was able to reach into the pack. First she removed her sandals, the laces of which were tied together. She hung them around her neck and removed the container of salve. It opened easily, and she smeared the healing paste thickly on her wound. She returned the small clay pot, and the wad of bloody seaweed, to the pack, which now dangled, near empty, from her shoulders.

She felt ready to try again. The shadow of the gull had stopped passing over the opening. She hoped it had soared to the sea and wouldn't return until it had a beak full of fish for its young. She would be fast. She planned it in her mind. She would lean from the opening, throw herself across the steep rock, and make a quick grasp of the hold beneath the nest. From there she had only to pull herself across quickly and to find the first step on the other side. He had told her it was quite close. Easy to reach. She thought it through.

One. Move quickly out of the mouth of the tunnel.

Two. Reach with her left hand, arm stretched across the rock, under the nest and grab the handhold firmly.

Three. Push with her legs. Holding on with the one hand (how grateful she was now for all those months of arm strength exercises!), move across the cliff side. Feel with her toes for small ledges; they would help.

Four. Find the first step and reach for it with her right hand. Then she could move her left arm away from the nest and go beyond the place where the gull would see her as a threat.

Time to start. From her brief glimpse of the sky when she had tried to reach the nest before she was attacked, she guessed that it was now very late in the day. She must do this quickly. Once she passed this danger, the end was in sight and she could reach it before darkness.

Go!

Claire hoisted herself up until she was kneeling at the lip of the tunnel. She reached across with her left arm quickly, into the debris that formed the thick base of the nest. She found the knobby handhold there and grasped it. The squawking from the chicks became louder. They were frantic with fear.

Holding tightly with her left hand, feeling the strength in her arm, which would now briefly be her only support, she planted her feet firmly to push off and propel herself across the rock.

From the sky, its black wings folded tightly against it, the parent gull, summoned by its young, dove at her. She could see its pink legs folded against the white underparts, and the red spot at the tip of its razor-sharp yellow bill. But it was just a split second. The gull speared her arm, ripped at it, wrenched it loose from its hold. Claire screamed and fell back into the tunnel, instinctively using her feet once again to wedge herself against its walls.

She was bleeding badly. She could see the bone of her arm exposed by the huge gash the bird had made when it tore at her with its beak.

She leaned her head as low as possible and took deep, shuddering breaths. If she fainted, she would slide all the way back down the tunnel that it had taken her several hours to climb.

She would not allow herself to faint.

She would not allow herself to be killed by a bird.

It came to her what she must do.

She removed the container of salve again from her pack, opened it, and applied it thickly to the gaping slice in her flesh. She used the salve as a paste to compress the wadded seaweed against the wound. Still it bled. The little pot was empty now and she let it drop, hearing it fall as the water gourd had. She reached into the pack again and found nothing remaining there but the red-covered rock intended as a signal when she reached the top. She held it between her teeth while she used her knife to cut through the fabric of the pack itself and made a strip of the leather. Then she placed the flat rock over the seaweed and held it fast there with the leather strip wrapped tightly around her injured arm. She tested it, moving her arm in several ways, and the dressing stayed firm. Then she dropped the ruined pack down into the tunnel and it disappeared into the darkness.

Next she moved up to the top opening of the tunnel. The gull was circling, waiting. Claire ignored it. She uncoiled the rope that she had been carrying looped around her shoulder. She made a noose.

Then once again she planned what she was about to do. She did it in her mind, rehearsed it: this motion, then that. She knew she must be very, very fast. Another successful attack from the black-backed gull would bring about her death. She could not let that happen.

When she was ready, she thought: *Now.* She lifted her upper body from the tunnel lip, spun the noose, and let the rope fly. It was just a short distance, and her aim was accurate. She lassoed the nest, tightened the noose, and pulled. It was startlingly heavy for something made of twigs, seaweed, and grass. But it crumpled, folded upon itself, and she ripped it from the rock, flinging it outward into the air. She watched it, and the chicks, falling for a moment, and the enormous gull swooping toward it and shrieking.

Then she lifted herself, reached across, grabbed the now visible handhold with her uninjured arm, and pulled herself triumphantly across the cliff face and to the steps that would lead her to the top.

Sixteen

CLAIRE LAY PANTING upon the solid earth. It was dark now. The attack of the gull had consumed precious time, and when she reached the steps that would be the final climb, dusk had come. He had said “Don’t look down” because this very last section, although it was made relatively easy in its climb because of the odd outcroppings that formed footholds, was sheer in its vertical drop. It could have been terrifying to look down and realize the distance that a fall would be. To lose your grip out of terror after such a dangerous and difficult day, to fall at the very end of it—that was what Einar feared. But she rose and looked down now from the edge at the top and saw nothing but darkness. Above her, the sky was filled with stars.

She felt the wound on her neck. It was encrusted with dried blood and very sore, but she thought it was not a serious wound; she had seen worse on children who had tumbled on rocks. Her arm was a greater concern. Gingerly she untied the tight leather strip and let it fall away. The flat rock was stuck to the seaweed, and she pried it loose carefully. Its red covering had been meant as a sign that she was safe. She wondered if Einar would be able to see that it was stained with her blood as well. She held it to her lips briefly, trying to impart a message, a thank-you, a goodbye; then she threw it as hard as she could out into the night beyond the cliff.

She left the seaweed on the throbbing gash and retied the leather strip around it, using her teeth and her right hand. Then she put on her sandals. She was to wait here, Einar had said, for dawn. At dawn the man would come, a strange man wearing a black cloak. He was the one who would take her to her son. Einar did not know how. He only knew that the man had special powers. He came to people who needed help, and offered himself.

Claire was to say yes to the man. There would be a price. She must pay it, Einar said. There would be no choice. To decline the man would bring terrible punishment upon her. Einar knew. The man had approached him, assessed how desperately cold he was after the climb, seen that his toes were white with frostbite, and offered—for a price they would agree upon—to provide him with warmth, comfort, and transportation to whatever his

destination might be. It was tempting. But Einar was both willful and proud. He had said no.

"I don't need you," he had said. "I'm strong. I climbed out alone."

The man had offered again. "One more chance," he said. "The price will be something you can afford, I assure you. A fair trade." But Einar, suddenly mistrustful, had again said no. Without warning he had found himself on the ground, struck down and weakened by a mysterious power summoned by the man. He lay there unable to move, watching in horror while the man reached under his cloak, withdrew a gleaming hatchet, and chopped off half of his right foot. Then the left.

This was the person Claire was to wait for and say yes to.

She moved carefully away from the cliff's edge, feeling her way in the dark to a mossy patch beside some bushes. She arranged herself there and fell into an exhausted sleep. When he came, it was morning, and she was still sleeping. He touched her arm and she woke.

"Exquisite eyes," he said when she opened them. Claire blinked. She stared at him. He was not what she had expected. He was ordinary. Somehow she had thought he would be powerful in appearance. Large. Frightening. Instead, he was narrow-shouldered and thin, with a sallow complexion and neatly trimmed dark hair. And for such a desolate place—she looked around and saw nothing but a barren landscape—he was oddly dressed, in a fashion that was unfamiliar to her. Behind the cloak that Einar had described she could see that he wore a tightly fitted dark suit with sharp creases in the trousers. On his feet were highly polished shoes of a fine leather. There were gloves on his hands, not knitted gloves such as those she was accustomed to wearing in winter, or the coarse gloves that had helped her grip the rope as she climbed. The man's black gloves were of a thin, silky fabric and molded to fit his slender fingers.

The gloved hands frightened her. He was reaching for her arm, and Claire didn't want to be touched by those sinuous, silk-encased fingers. She shrank back and rubbed her eyes ("exquisite eyes"? What did that mean?), then rose without his help and stood.

He moved back slightly, facing her. Then he bowed, and his lipless mouth stretched into a mirthless smile. "Your name, I believe, is Claire," he said. "And perhaps my presence comes as a surprise? Allow me—"

She interrupted him. “No. I was told you would be here.” She could tell that the interruption annoyed him. But she felt vulnerable and humiliated, standing there in her shredded clothing, bleeding from wounds and in need of his help. She wanted to assert herself in some way.

“Indeed. I am here at your service, prepared to offer a fulfillment of your wishes, at a price to be negotiated to our mutual satisfaction.”

Claire drew herself up. “I understand that,” she replied, and could see him stiffen with annoyance again. He wanted her to be weak, and needy. She swore to herself that she would not be. “You realize,” she went on, “that I have nothing of value to give to you.”

“Shall we let me be the judge of that?” He spoke now in a threatening whisper.

“If you wish,” Claire said.

“Let us begin, then. Let us commence. Let us undertake to establish what it is that you hope to achieve or acquire, what it is that I may provide to you for this yet-to-be-determined price.”

She could feel her resolve weaken, and her voice faltered as she told him. “I have a son,” she said. “I want to find my son.”

“A *son!* How sweet. Maternal love is such a delicious trait. So you don’t want riches, or romance, but simply . . . your *son?*” The way he said the word, hissing it, sneering it, made her feel sick.

“I was told that you could help me.”

“You have been informed correctly. Accurately and precisely. But! We must agree on the price to be paid. The trade, do you see? A son in return for—”

She made her voice as firm as she could. “I have nothing. You can see that. I was hoping—”

To her horror he reached forward and grasped a thick handful of Claire’s long hair. She flinched.

“What is this, then? You have beautiful hair. Luxuriant tresses, I would say. Sweet-smelling despite your recent ordeal. Do you call this nothing?”

He put his face into her hair and inhaled. His breath was foul-smelling, and Claire willed herself not to step back in disgust. He was twisting the hair he held and hurting her, but she stood her ground. Was that what he wanted? Just her hair? He was welcome to it. It was dirty and tangled and she would be glad to free herself of it, Claire thought.

But he opened his gloved hand, released the handful of curls, and stood back to look at her with his slitted, close-set eyes. Her first thought on meeting him had been: *ordinary.* Now she saw that he was not ordinary at all but darkly sinister. It was not just his breath that smelled. Suddenly he was enveloped in a rancid aroma so thick that it was almost foglike. His words seemed to ooze from his lipless mouth.

"Hardly a fair trade, is it? A head full of coppery curls in return for a living boy? A son?" Had she imagined that his tongue darted in and out, like that of a snake, when he hissed the word?

"No," Claire agreed. "It doesn't seem an equal trade. But as I told you, I have nothing."

"*Nothing* is such a pathetic word, isn't it? But then, *you* are pathetic. Your clothes are rags and you have a pustulous scab on your neck. Still . . ." He hesitated. "My calling, my mission, my motivation and my very existence, is to create trades. This for that! Reciprocity!"

The tongue flickered again as he drew out the word "reciprocity." Claire shuddered but maintained her composure.

"So you want your boy. Your son. Tell me his name."

"I'm sorry—I'm not certain. My memory has been damaged. I think he was called Babe."

"Babe?" His voice was contemptuous. Claire felt as if she were failing a test.

"Wait!" she said. "Maybe it was Abe! It was so long ago. It might have been Abe!"

"Abe, Babe . . ." The man's body swayed as he repeated the words in a singsong voice. Then he fell silent, moved close to her, leaned forward, and whispered harshly. "I offer you this trade. I make the offer only once. Take it or leave it. Ready?"

Dreading what he was to say, Claire nodded. She had no choice.

He grabbed her neck with his eerily smooth gloved hand, pressing into her wound so that pain sliced through her, and drew her face close to his. She could smell his foul breath again. "I want your *youth,*" he said harshly into her ear, and his warm saliva sprayed across her cheek.

"Trade?" he murmured, still holding her in his awful embrace.

"Yes," Claire whispered.

"Say it."

"Trade," she said loudly.

“Done.” He released her then and shoved her away from him. When he turned and walked away, she understood that she was to follow. Surprisingly, she found it difficult to walk. Her legs were weak. She couldn’t straighten her body easily. Had it been only twenty-four hours before that she had leapt from rock to rock, had climbed and grasped and pulled herself up the sheer cliff? Now she was shuffling and bent, and it was hard to catch her breath. She struggled to keep up with the man, who was striding quickly ahead. Her hair fell forward over her face, and when she reached up to smooth it back, she saw that her hand had changed, had become veiny and spotted; and she saw, too, that the loosened hair was no longer the thick red-gold curls he had admired a few minutes before. Now it was a sparse handful of coarse gray.

He paused, looked back, and smirked at her confusion. “Get a move on, you old hag,” he said. “And by the way . . .”

He watched her contemptuously as she made her way, shuffling around a boulder in the path. “Your son’s name is *Gabe*,” he said.

“And mine? My name,” he added, with a superior and hostile smile, “is Trademaster.”

Book III

Beyond

One

THE OLD WOMAN appeared frequently. Suddenly she would be there, standing in the thick pines beside the river, watching him as he worked. Gabe would catch sight of her, would see her dark homespun clothing, her stooped posture, and the fierce, knowing intimacy of her gaze. But then she would withdraw and disappear into the shaded grove of trees. If he turned away and then looked back, there was no longer a sign of her, not even a whispering motion in the needled branches she had moved through. She simply went away. Sometimes he thought of calling after her, asking who she was, why she watched him. But for some reason he felt shy.

He saw her in the village as well, but noticed her less there because he was generally in the company of friends. He and the other boys, the group he lived with, would be wrestling and joking, vying to be cleverest, or strongest, as they made their way together to or from the schoolhouse. Sometimes the people of the village complained about them and their horseplay, said that they were a noisy, inconsiderate group, worse than any bunch of adolescents that had ever lived in Boys' Lodge. One neighbor had called them "louts" after they wrested plums from the tree beside her cottage, then squashed them in the path.

This particular old woman, though she was often nearby, never glared at the group of boys, as others did, or chided them for their behavior. She simply watched. She had been doing it for a long time. And Gabe thought that she watched *him* most of all. It puzzled him.

Occasionally he thought about using his power—well, he never knew exactly what to call it, but he thought of it as *veering*—to try to learn more about who she was, why she watched him. But he never did. His power made him nervous. He found veering tiring, painful, and a little frightening. So though he tested it now and then, seeing if it was still there (and it always was; sometimes he found himself wishing it wouldn't be), trying to understand it (and he never did, not really), he rarely called it into full use.

Anyway, she was gone. He was annoyed at himself for the time he had wasted, wondering about her, when he had so much to do, still. Sighing, Gabe looked around the clearing on the riverbank, the place he had

claimed for his task, the place where he was now spending hours every day. His bare feet were deep in wood shavings. He smiled at himself, realizing there was sawdust on his face, stuck there by his own sweat. He licked his lips and tasted powdered cedar.

The boards that he had crafted so carefully were neatly stacked, but his tools were scattered about, and it looked from the graying clouds as if rain was on the way. He heard a rumble of thunder. Time to get things into the shed. But even as he moved his tools, trudging back and forth to store them in the primitive little structure he had built between two trees, he found himself thinking again of the old woman.

There were so few mysteries in the small village. When new residents arrived, there was always a ceremony of welcome. Their histories were told. He remembered none for her, but he would have been a child then; he had seen the strange woman for years now, had felt her eyes on him since he was a young boy. And he rarely attended the ceremonies. Some of the histories were interesting, Gabe thought, especially if they involved danger and narrow escapes. But people rambled on, and sometimes they wept, which embarrassed him.

I'll stop being shy, he thought. *Next time I notice her staring at me the way she does, I'll simply introduce myself. Then she'll have to tell me who she is.*

The rain began spattering suddenly. Gabe closed the crooked, hastily made door of the shed he had built from old boards. Briefly he glanced back through the increasing downpour, at the grove of trees where the woman stood from time to time. Then he closed the latch on the door of the shed and ran through the rain toward the village.

"How's the boat coming?" It was Simon, one of his friends, standing on the porch of Boys' Lodge as Gabe climbed the steps and shook his head to try to get some of the wetness out of his curly hair.

"All right, I guess. Slow."

He went inside to change into dry clothes. It would be time for dinner soon, he thought. There were no clocks in the village, but the bell tower rang at intervals, and the midafternoon bell had sounded some time ago. On a shelf in his cubicle Gabe found a clean, folded shirt and put it on. He tossed his wet one into a bin in the hall.

He lived in Boys' Lodge with twelve other adolescent orphaned boys. Most of his lodge-mates had lost their parents to illness or accident, though one, Tarik, had been abandoned as an infant by an irresponsible couple who had no interest in raising a child. All of the boys had a history to tell. Gabe did too, but he didn't enjoy the telling; there were too many I-don't-knows to it.

He had asked Jonas again and again. It was Jonas who had brought him here years before, when Gabe was just an infant. "Why did my parents let you take me?" he had asked.

"You didn't have parents," Jonas had explained.

"*Everybody* has parents!"

"Not in the place where we lived. Things were different there."

"How about you? Did you have parents?"

"I had people I called Mother and Father. I'd been assigned to them."

"Well, what about me?"

"You hadn't been assigned yet. You were a bit of a problem."

Gabe had grinned at that. He liked the idea of being troublesome. It seemed to give him a certain superiority.

"I had to have parents, though. People don't just get born from *nothing*."

"You know what, Gabe? I was just a boy then. Babies appeared from the infant-care building and were given to parents. I accepted it. I never knew anything else. I never asked where the babies had come from."

Gabe had hooted with laughter. "Hah! *Where do babies come from?* Every kid asks that!"

Gabe was laughing, but Jonas had looked serious and concerned. "You're right," he said, slowly. "And I do remember that there were young girls chosen each year to be what was called 'birthmothers.' They must have been the ones who . . ."

"What happened to the birthmothers? What happened to *my* birthmother?"

"I don't know, Gabe."

"Didn't she want me?"

Jonas sighed. "I don't know, Gabe. It was a different system—"

"I'm going to find out."

"How?"

Gabe was very young then, no more than nine. But he swaggered when he replied. "I'll go back there. You can't stop me. I'll find a way."

Now that the boys had moved out of the Childhood Place where they had spent their first years, now that they were in Boys' Lodge, their interests had changed and they rarely talked of their earlier years. It was girls who did that, Gabe thought. At Girls' Lodge, he heard, the girls talked long into the evening, retelling their own tales to each other. For the boys, though, talk now was of school, or of sports, or of the future, not the past.

Boys' Lodge was a congenial group. They did their schoolwork together in the evenings, and shared meals, their food prepared by a staff of two workers in the kitchen. There was a lodge director, a kindly man who had a room within the building, and who mediated the infrequent disputes among the boys. One could go to him with problems. But Gabe often wished that he lived in a house with a family, the way his best friend, Nathaniel, did. Nathaniel had parents, and two sisters; their house was noisy with bickering and laughter.

Glancing through the window, through the rain that had now almost stopped, he could see the house where Nathaniel lived, farther along the curved path. Its little garden was thick with summer flowers, and as he watched, a door opened and a gray cat was sent outside, where it assumed a pose, in the way of cats, on the little porch and licked its paws. It was Deirdre's cat. Gabe tried to remember its name; he could picture Nathaniel's sister laughing when she had told it to him, but the whimsical name eluded him. Catacomb? Cataclysm? No. But something like those. Deirdre was good with words.

Pretty, too. Gabe flushed briefly, a little embarrassed at his own thoughts. He watched the cat, hoping that Deirdre would appear at the door. Maybe she would sit down and stroke the gray fur. *Catapult!* That was its name. He pictured her there, stroking Catapult, gazing into the distance, maybe thinking about—him? Maybe? Could that be possible? Of course, he realized suddenly, he could veer, and find out. But maybe he didn't really want to know? And anyway, there wasn't time. The dinner bell was about to ring. The other boys, laughing and noisy, would soon be rushing down the hallway.

Also, Gabe reminded himself, shaking off the thoughts about Nathaniel's pretty, dark-haired sister, it wasn't fair to her, even if he found that she *did* care about him. She shouldn't. Very soon he would finish his boat. And then he would be gone.

Two

"YOU KNOW HE'S building a boat."

Kira nodded. She had just gotten the children to sleep. They were so lively, into everything. Now that Annabelle could walk, she followed her two-year-old brother, Matthew, into all kinds of mischief. Kira was exhausted by evening. She brought her cup of tea, set her walking stick aside, and sat down beside Jonas, who looked troubled.

"I know. I was here when he came for the books, remember?"

Jonas glanced at the walls of the room. Shelves of books extended from the floor to the ceiling. And not just this room, but all the others in the house he shared with his family. It was one of the things they were trying now to teach the children: not to pull and grab at the books. So tempting, for babies: the bright colors. He remembered when the dog, as a puppy, had indulged in the same mischief, and again and again they had found corners of the lower volumes chewed. Now Frolic was middle-aged, overweight, lazy, and no longer needing to chew. He slept, snoring, on his folded blanket most of the day, and it was the toddlers who grabbed and gnawed.

"I always knew this time would come," Jonas said. "He told me when he was much younger that he would go looking for his past."

Kira nodded again. "Of course he wonders," she pointed out. "It will be the next generation, the ones like our children, who were born here, who won't feel that pull."

Both of them, like almost everyone in the small village, had come from another place, had fled something, had escaped from hardship of some kind. Jonas stood. He stared through the window out into the night. Kira recognized the look. Her husband had always had that need, to turn his gaze outward, trying to find the answers to things. It was the first thing she had noticed about him: the piercing blue eyes, and the way he had of seeming to see beyond what was obvious. In their earlier days together, when Jonas was Leader, he had called on that vision often for answers to problems. But the problems had fallen away, the village had thrived, and Jonas had relinquished leadership to others so that he could take up an unburdened life with his family.

Now he was the protector of the books and the knowledge. He was the scholar/librarian. It was Jonas to whom Gabriel had come not long ago, looking for books with diagrams and instructions, so that he could learn to build a boat.

He sighed, turning away from the darkness that was enfolding the village. “I worry about him,” he said.

Kira set aside the needlework she had picked up. She went to him, circled her arms around his waist, and looked up into those solemn eyes that were as blue as her own. “Of course you do. You brought him here.” It had been years before that Jonas, hardly more than a boy himself then, had brought Gabriel—a toddler with no past, a child who deserved a future—to this village, which had welcomed them with no questions.

“He was so little. And he had no one.”

“He had you.”

“I was a boy. I couldn’t be a parent to him. I didn’t know what that meant. The people who raised me did their best, but it was just a job to them.” Jonas sighed, recalling the couple he had called Mother and Father. “I remember that once I asked them if they loved me,” he said.

“And?”

He shook his head. “They didn’t know what that meant. They said the word was meaningless.”

“They did their best,” Kira said, after a moment, and he nodded.

“Gabe’s older now than I was when I brought him here,” Jonas mused. “Stronger. Braver.”

“Not as handsome, though.” She reached up, smiling, and smoothed a strand of his hair. Ordinarily he would have grinned back at her. But his face was worried and his thoughts were elsewhere.

“And I’m pretty sure he has a gift of some sort.”

Kira sighed. She knew what that meant. She and Jonas both had a gift. Sometimes it was exhilarating, but it was demanding, too, and burdensome, to know how to use it well, and when.

“I worry about what he’ll find, if he goes searching,” Jonas went on. “He wants a family, and there won’t be one. He was a—” Frowning, he searched for the right description. “He was a manufactured product,” he said at last. “We all were.”

Kira sat silently. It was a chilling description. Finally, thoughtfully, she replied. “All of us came here from difficult places,” she reminded him.

“But you had a mother who loved you.”

“I did. Until she died. Then I was all alone.”

“But you had her, at least, for—how many years?”

“Almost fifteen.”

“That’s close to Gabe’s age now. He feels such a longing for something, and I worry that he’ll never find it. That it never was there. But—” Jonas rose and went to the window. Kira watched him as he stood there, looking out into the darkness. Beyond him, she could see the outline of trees moving slightly in a night breeze against the dark starless sky. “But what?” she asked, when he had stood silently for a long moment.

“I’m not sure. I can feel something out there. Something connected to Gabe.”

“Something dangerous?” she asked in an apprehensive tone. “We must warn him, if there’s something dangerous out there.”

“No.” Jonas shook his head. He was still focusing on something beyond the room. “No. He’s not in danger. At least not now. But there is a presence. It seems benign. I think . . .” He paused. “I think something—some*one*—is looking for him. Or waiting? Waiting for him? *Watching* him?”

He didn’t tell Kira what else he felt, because he didn’t comprehend it himself, and because he didn’t want to alarm her. But there was something *else* out there, something vaguely at the edges of his awareness, something not really connected to Gabe. And the something else was vaguely familiar, and very dangerous.

Three

AT FIRST, HIS friends had helped him. But that time had passed. Now they were off fishing, playing ball, indulging in all the usual summer pastimes during this brief holiday from school. The excitement of Gabe's project was short-lived, and their interest waned when they realized he was not just hammering together a primitive raft that they could paddle along the riverbank.

Gabe hummed to himself as he measured his boards. He had a vague picture in his mind of the way they should go together. But though the books he had borrowed from Jonas had shown boats of all kinds, from ones with billowy sails to long, narrow vessels with rows of seated men at oars, none had provided instructions for the building. His would be small, he knew. Just big enough for him and his supplies. It would have a paddle; he had already begun carving one, crouched in his little shed during rainy days.

"Any chance you'd like to go fishing?"

Gabe looked up at the sound of the voice. Nathaniel, tall and brown from the sun, was standing on the path, holding his gear. Often they had fished together, usually from a huge rock on the bank farther along. The river was easy to fish, slow moving and somewhat shallow there; the silvery, sinuous trout were eager for the bait, and made good eating later.

It was tempting. But Gabe shook his head. "Can't. I'm behind. This is slower going than I thought it would be."

"What's that?" Nathaniel asked, pointing to the edge of the clearing where a leafy stack of thin poles waited.

Gabe looked over. "Bamboo."

"You can't build from that. You need real planks for a boat."

Gabe laughed. "I know. I'm using cedar. But I need the bamboo for . . . Well, here; I'll show you." He wiped his sweaty hands on the hem of his shirt and then went and got the large book from the shed.

"Jonas let you bring it here?" Nathaniel asked in surprise.

Gabe nodded. "I had to promise to keep it clean and dry." He set the book on a flat rock, squatted there, and turned the pages. "Look," he said, pointing to a page.

Nathaniel looked at the picture of a large vessel with its many sails unfurled. The rigging was complicated, with countless lines and winches holding the billowing sails in place, and a large crew of men could be seen on deck. “You’re crazy,” Nathaniel said. “You can’t build that.”

Gabe chuckled. “No, no. I just wanted to show you. It’s not for rivers anyway. They sailed them once on oceans. I think we learned about it in history class.”

Nathaniel nodded. “There were pirates,” he recalled. “That’s the part I paid attention to.”

Gabe turned the pages slowly.

He smiled. “Here’s mine,” he said, and he rifled the pages until the book opened to a page near the end, a place that had clearly been opened to frequently. “Don’t laugh.”

But Nathaniel did, when he leaned down to look at the picture. Gabe, watching his face, chuckled as well. The picture was of a tiny boat, with one lone man, huge waves surging around him, shark fins visible in the foam. There was endless sea and sky. The man looked terrified, and doomed.

“So you’re planning your own death? Where is this guy, anyway?”

“Ocean. But that’s far from here. I don’t need to think about ocean, just river. And I’m not going to end up like him. I’m just copying his boat, sort of. Mine’s smaller, and doesn’t have that cabin part. Mine will be little, and sturdy. That’s all I’ll need. It’ll be easy to build.”

Gabe looked around at the piles of boards, the sawdust, the mess on the ground. “Well, I *thought* it would be easy.”

“How will you steer it?” Nathaniel asked, still peering at the picture of the lone man cowering in the boat as the waves approached.

“Paddle. Anyway, the river will carry it. I won’t need to steer much. Just to go ashore when I want to.”

“So what’s the bamboo for?”

“It’ll hold it together. I invented this system myself. Once I get the cedar all arranged in the right shape, I’ll use the bamboo—first I’ll wet it, so that when it dries, it tightens—it’ll be like rope.”

Nathaniel looked around. The cedar planks were lying haphazardly about, a few of them hammered together. He could see that Gabe had been preparing the bamboo, peeling and slicing it thin. It was a huge task for a boy to do alone.

“Does anybody ever come and help you?”

Gabriel hesitated. “Not really. Some old woman comes and watches me, though.” He gestured toward the grove of pines. “She stands over there.”

“An *old woman?*”

“Yes. You’ve seen her. She’s all bent over and you can tell she has trouble walking. She sort of follows me. I don’t know why. Someday I’m going to yell at her to stop.”

Nathaniel looked uneasy. He gave a nervous laugh. “You can’t yell at an old woman,” he said.

“I know. I was kidding. Maybe I’ll just growl, and scare her a little.” Gabe made a face and growled loudly, imitating a beast of some kind.

Both boys laughed.

“Sure you don’t want to go fishing?” Nathaniel asked.

Gabe shook his head and picked up the book to return it to the shed. “Can’t.”

His friend gathered his things and turned away. “Deirdre says she misses you,” he remarked with a sly grin. “You’re never around lately.”

Gabe sighed. He looked up the path as if he might see Nathaniel’s pretty sister there. “Will she come to the feast tomorrow night?”

Nathaniel nodded and shouldered his fishing pole. “Everyone will. My mother’s at the gathering place now, helping to get things ready.”

“Tell Deirdre I’ll see her there.” Gabe gave his friend a wave and turned again to his work as the other boy walked away.

Four

FEASTS WERE FREQUENT in the village. Sometimes there was an excuse: Harvest, Midsummer, or a marriage. But often, no reason was necessary. People just wanted a time of merriment, laughter, dressing up, eating—and overeating—and so a feast was planned.

Kira dressed the children in bright-colored embroidered outfits that she had designed and stitched. She was a masterful seamstress. Many people sought her out to create their wedding clothes; and they still talked in the village about the hand-woven cloth adorned with intricately patterned birds of all kinds in which she had wrapped the body of her father before his burial. Kira's father had been blind, and sound had been his life. He knew—and could imitate—each bird's call and song; they came from the trees, unafraid, to eat from his outstretched hands. The entire village had gathered to sing a farewell as he was laid to rest, but the only song that day was theirs; the birds had fallen silent, as if they mourned.

Her own garment for the feast was a deep blue dress; she entwined blue ribbons through the straps of her sandals and in her long hair. Jonas smiled at her in admiration and affection, but his own clothing, even on Feast Night, was simple: a homespun shirt over coarse trousers. With a roll of his eyes, he let his wife attach a blue flower from the garden to his collar. Jonas was not fond of decoration. His tastes were plain.

Annabelle and Matthew scampered about the large room, giggling, while Kira wrapped the pie she had baked and placed it in a basket she had adorned with daisies and ferns. Frolic yawned and rose from the blanket where he'd been napping. The dog sensed excitement and wanted to take part. Noticing, Kira laughed, and leaned over to wind a stemmed flower around his neck. "There," she said. "Now you're in your party outfit too!" Tail wagging, Frolic followed the family as they set out from their house. Jonas carried the pie basket and Matthew rode atop his father's shoulders. Annabelle held tightly to her mother's free hand, the hand that didn't grasp the carved cane that Kira had always needed for walking. Ahead, beyond the curve of the path, they could already hear music—flutes and fiddles—from the gathering place where celebrations were held.

It was a very small village that had had its beginnings years before in a gathering of outcasts. Fleeing battles or chaos of all kinds, often wounded or driven out by their own clans or villages, each of the original settlers had made his way to this place. They had found strength in one another, had formed a community. They had welcomed others.

From time to time, as the years had passed, people muttered that they shouldn't let newcomers in; the village was becoming crowded, and it was hard, sometimes, for the newcomers to learn the customs and rules. There were arguments and petitions and debates.

What if my daughter wants to marry one of them?

They talk with a funny accent.

What if there aren't enough jobs?

Why should we have to support them while they're learning our ways?

It had been Jonas, during his time as Leader, who had gently but firmly reminded the villagers that they had all been outsiders once. They had all come here for a new life. Eventually they had voted to remain what they had become: a sanctuary, a place of welcome.

As a child, Gabe had yawned and fidgeted when his class was taken, as each school class was, to visit the village museum and learn the history. History was boring, he thought. He was embarrassed when the museum curator, pointing to various artifacts in the "Vehicles of Arrival" exhibit, had gestured to the battered red sled and explained that a brave boy named Jonas had battled a blizzard and fought his way here carrying a dying baby.

"And today we all know that Jonas has become our village Leader, and the baby he rescued and brought here is a healthy boy," the curator had said dramatically, "named Gabriel." His classmates grinned at him. They poked each other and giggled. Gabe pretended to be bored. He averted his eyes and leaned down to scratch an imaginary bug bite on his leg.

Most of the earliest settlers, those with their histories recorded in the museum, had grown old and were gone now. Kira's father, Christopher, was buried in the village cemetery beside the pine grove. Left for dead by his enemies in a distant community, he had stumbled, sightless, to this village and been saved; with his new name of Seer, he had lived a long life here of dignity and wisdom. Kira tended his grave now, taking the babies with her while she weeded and watered the soft blanket of fragrant purple thyme she had planted there.

He was buried beside his adopted son, Matty. The villagers remembered Matty as a fun-loving young man who had been destroyed when he fought the evil, unknowable forces that had menaced the village in those harsher times, seven years earlier.

Thinking of those times as he passed the cemetery on his way to the evening's festivities, Gabe recalled the day Matty's body had been found and carried home. Gabe had been young then, only eight, a rambunctious resident of the Children's House, happiest with solitary adventures and disinterested in schoolwork. But he had always admired Matty, who had tended and helped Seer with such devotion and undertaken village tasks with energy and good humor. It had been Matty who had taught Gabe to bait a hook and cast his line from the fishing rock, Matty who had shown him how to make a kite and catch the wind with it. The day of his death, Gabe had huddled, heartbroken, in the shadow of a thick stand of trees and watched as the villagers lined the path and bowed their heads in respect to watch the litter carrying the ravaged body move slowly through. Frightened by his own feelings, he had listened mutely to the wails of grief that permeated the community.

That day had changed him. It had changed the entire village. Shaken by the death of a boy they had loved, each person had found ways to be more worthy of the sacrifice he had made. They had become kinder, more careful, more attentive to one another. They had worked hard to eradicate customs that had begun to corrupt their society, banning even seemingly benign diversions such as a gaming machine, a simple gambling device that spit out candy to its winners.

For years a mysterious, sinister man known as Trademaster had appeared now and then in the village, bringing tawdry thrills and temptations but leaving chaos and discontentment behind. It had been Jonas, as Leader, who saw through him, who sensed the deep evil in the man and insisted on his banishment.

Freed of the menacing greed and self-indulgence that had almost overwhelmed them during that time, the villagers had learned to celebrate themselves, as they were doing this evening.

Gabe stood still in the path for a moment. He noticed a small bouquet of fresh flowers beside the stone into which Matty's name had been carved. The village people honored Matty's memory with such tokens because he had made them into better people. Gabe did so more privately. He did so

by reminding himself of a conversation he had once had with the older boy he had so admired.

"You must pay more attention in school, Gabe," Matty had told him. Gabe had been required to stay late after classes that day, for extra help. Now they were sitting together on the outcropping of rock at the edge of the river.

"I don't like school," Gabe had replied, feeling the fishing line between his fingers.

"I didn't either. And I was willful and full of mischief, same as you. But Seer made me work at it because he cared about me so much."

Gabe shrugged. "Nobody cares about me."

"Leader does. I do."

"I guess," Gabe acknowledged.

"He's the one who brought you here. He had a hard time of it too."

Gabe rolled his eyes. "Did you hear that at the museum as part of the tour? I wish they'd stop telling that stupid story. And give me another worm, would you? Mine wiggled off the hook."

Patiently Matty had helped him to rebait his hook. "You need knowledge," he said. "That's how Jonas got to be Leader, by studying."

"I don't want to be Leader."

"Neither do I. But I want to *know* stuff. Don't you?"

Gabe sighed. "Some stuff, maybe. Not math. Not grammar."

Matty had laughed. Then he had turned serious again for a moment. "And Gabe?"

"What?"

"You're going to find that you have a gift of some kind. Some of us do, and you're going to be one. I can tell."

Gabe busied himself with the worm and the hook. For some reason the conversation had begun to make him self-conscious.

"I know," Matty said, "it's hard to talk about it because it's hard to understand. But it's another reason why you must study. You must make yourself ready. Someday you'll be called upon for something special. Maybe something dangerous. So you have to prepare yourself, Gabe. You'll need knowledge."

"Look," Gabe said loudly, changing the subject, and pointed. "There's a big trout over there where the rock makes a shadow. He's hiding. But he sees us. Look at his eyes."

Matty sighed affectionately and turned his attention to the large fish suspended in the dark water by the rock. It withdrew further, as if it felt their sudden interest, and its shiny eyes darted back and forth. Matty watched. “He thinks he can escape us by lurking there in the dark. But not us, Gabe! We’re too clever for him. Let’s do it. Let’s try to get him.”

Thinking of it now, Gabe remembered it all: the laughter, the puzzling conversation, the sunshine that day, the sound of the slow-moving river, and then their stealthy maneuvers as they stalked the huge, silvery fish, finally caught him, and then threw him back. It had all been years ago, and they had never had another chance to talk in that way.

Matty had been correct, though, about needing to learn stuff. Gabe had tried hard to settle into his studies, and it served him well now, the math he had hated, as he measured and fitted together the pieces of his boat.

But he found himself wishing now that he had not felt so awkward, that he had confided in Matty that day. He had just discovered it then, the power that he had, the power to veer, and was still confused by it.

It had been at a feast, one of the usual celebrations. Probably Midsummer, he thought now, remembering it. With the other boys his age, eight and nine, he had joined the crowd watching a contest. Two of the village men were wrestling. Their bodies were smeared with oil so that their hands slid as they tried to grasp at each other. The crowd shouted encouragement and the men repositioned themselves, shifting on their feet, each waiting for the right instant, the right move, to topple the other and emerge as the winner. Gabe, watching intently, found his own bare feet shifting in the dirt; he panted, imitating the wrestlers. He focused on his own favorite, the man called Miller, who was in charge of grain production each fall. Miller was a large man and a likable one who sometimes on slow workdays organized the boys into teams and taught them intricate games on the playing field. Even in the midst of this intense match, Miller was laughing as he caught his opponent in a hold and struggled to down him.

Gabe, moving his own skinny body in imitation of the wrestlers, found himself wondering how it felt to be Miller: to be so strong, so in command of his muscles and limbs. Suddenly an odd silence enveloped him. He stopped hearing the grunts of the wrestlers, the shouts of the crowd, the barking of dogs, the music from the fiddlers preparing nearby. And he felt himself move, in the silence. He *veered*—though the word had not yet come to him then—and entered Miller. *Became* Miller. Experienced

Miller. *Was* Miller for that instant. He knew, briefly, how it felt to be strong, to be in command, to be winning, to be loving the battle and the coming win.

Then sound returned. Gabe returned. The crowd roared in approval and Miller stood with his arms raised, victorious, then leaned forward and helped his laughing opponent up. Gabe slid to the ground and huddled there in the cheering crowd, breathing hard, exhausted, confused, and exhilarated.

After that day it had happened again, several times, until he could feel it coming, and then—later—found that he could command and control the veer. Once, he remembered guiltily, he tried to use it to cheat in school. Seated at his desk, floundering over a math test—fractions, which he had not studied the way he should have—he glanced up at Mentor, the schoolmaster. Mentor was standing near the window, looking at the board on which the test questions had been written.

If I could veer into Mentor right now, *enter* Mentor, Gabe thought, I could grab all of the answers to these test problems. He concentrated. He closed his eyes and thought about Mentor, about his knowledge, about what it would feel like to *be* Mentor. Sure enough, the silence came. He felt his consciousness shift and move toward the schoolmaster. Within seconds he was there, within the man, experiencing being Mentor.

The veer worked. But not in the way Gabe had planned. He found no math answers there. Instead he had an overwhelming feeling of a kind of passion: for knowledge, for learning of all sorts—and for the children who sat that day at the small desks, as Gabe did. He felt Mentor's love for his students and his hopes for them and what they would learn from him.

The veer ended suddenly, as it always did, and Gabe put his head into his hands. The sounds of the classroom returned, and the schoolmaster appeared beside him.

"Are you all right, Gabriel?"

Gabe found himself shaking. He had tears in his eyes. "I don't feel well," he whispered.

Mentor excused him for the rest of the day and Gabe walked slowly away from the schoolhouse, promising himself that he would study, that he would not disappoint his teacher again as he had so often in the past.

He never told anyone. Veering seemed a private act, something to both savor and sometimes dread alone.

Now, though, he found himself wishing he had confided in Matty when he'd had the opportunity. Not only about the veer. He wished he had told Matty about how desperately he yearned to know about his mother. He couldn't tell his lodge-mates; they would laugh. But Matty would have understood. And it was lonely, to yearn so, all alone.

He reached down into the path, picked up a small pebble, and tossed it toward Matty's gravestone. It tapped lightly against the rock and fell to the ground where other pebbles lay near the flowers. He had thrown each of them. "Hi," Gabe whispered.

Ahead, from the Pavilion where gatherings were held, he heard music and the happy shouts of children. He thought of his friends, of the games they were already playing, and of the contests and dancing later. He thought of pretty Deirdre with the sprinkling of freckles across her nose. He saw smoke and could smell the pigs that had been roasting on a spit most of the day. He knew Kira would have made a pie, and there would be thick cream swirled with honey to mound on top of it. Gabe left the cemetery and his somber thoughts behind him and began to run toward the party.

Five

HER BACK ACHED badly. It had ached for a long time now, for several years, but it was getting worse, and Claire had difficulty straightening herself. She walked bent.

She had gone to see Herbalist, the man who dispensed medicines to villagers. But it was clear that his remedies were the same that she had learned in her years with Alys. The drinking of birch and willow tea would ease the pain a bit but could not take it away.

Herbalist had asked her the obvious question: "What is your age?"

"I don't know," she replied to him. That was true. She had been a young girl when she was washed from the sea to the place where she had lived for years. She had grown up there and become a young woman. She had left there and become, overnight, old. It was not a question of years.

Herbalist was not surprised by her answer. Many people who had found their way to the village had little memory of their own past. He prescribed the bark infusions for her aches but said to her, "Such pain comes for us all, in great age."

"I know," Claire said. She had no wish to explain what had befallen her.

Herbalist lifted her arm gently and felt the thin, sagging skin. Carefully he examined the dark spots on the backs of her hands. "Do you still have teeth?" he asked.

"Some," she said, and showed him.

"And your eyes? Ears?"

She could still see and hear.

"So," Herbalist said with a smile, "you can't dance or chew meat. But if you can hear the birds sing and watch the wind in the leaves, then you still have much pleasure left.

"Your time is limited now, though," he told her, "so you should enjoy everything you can. That's what I do. I think I must be as old as you. I have the same aches." He wrapped the dried barks for her, and she placed them in her carrying basket.

"I'll see you at the feast," he said as she turned to go. "We can watch the dancing and remember our young years. There is pleasure in that."

Claire thanked him, leaned on her cane, and continued down the path to her small cottage. In the distance she could hear some young boys shouting as they played some sort of game with a ball. Perhaps one was Gabe. She rarely found him at games, lately, though; most often he was alone in the clearing near the river, hammering away on the misshapen vessel that he called his boat. Claire often stood hidden in the trees and watched him at work. In a way she admired his dedication to the odd project. But it saddened and puzzled her, his wish to be gone.

When she had entered the village for the first time, like so many others, she had been welcomed, years before. The fragility of old age was new to her then, and it had still startled her when she rose in the morning with her bones aching and stiff. The memory of running, climbing, even dancing, was alive and throbbing within her, but frailty made her hobble and limp.

She had seen her son for the first time, in this place, when he was a child of eight or nine. She remembered that day. He ran along the path near the cottage to which she had been assigned, calling to his friends, laughing, his unkempt hair bright in the sunlight. “Gabe!” she heard a boy call; but she would have known him without hearing it. It was the same smile she remembered, the same silvery laugh.

She had moved forward in that moment, intending to rush to him, to greet and embrace him. Perhaps she would make the silly face, the one with which they had once mimicked each other. But when she started eagerly toward him, she forgot her own weakness; her dragging foot caught on a stone and she stumbled clumsily. Quickly she righted herself, but in that moment she saw him glance toward her, then look away in disinterest. As if looking through his eyes, she perceived her own withered skin, her sparse gray hair, the awkward gait with which she moved. She stayed silent, and turned away, thinking.

Did he need to know, after all? He appeared to be a happy child. If she were to make herself known, to tell her unbelievable story, he would be stunned, uncomprehending. His friends might taunt him. Perhaps he would reject her. Or worse—perhaps he would feel obligated to tend her in her remaining days. His carefree life would be interrupted. She would be a burden, an embarrassment.

In the end she decided that it was enough that she had found him. She would let him be. But she realized then the magnitude of the cruel exchange Trademaster had offered her.

Through the years she had watched Gabe grow from a mischievous boy into this quiet young man who now seemed to have a mission she didn't understand. Why a boat? The river was a dangerous thing. The village children could swim and play in the one protected section where the water was shallow and slow. But farther out, and farther along, the water rushed furiously over sharp rocks. She had heard that there was a steep waterfall someplace, and fallen trees here and there that could easily smash the thin boards he was so carefully tying together with strips of bamboo.

Claire was very frightened of swift-moving water. She had reason to be. She had once lived beside a river, once beside a sea. Both had brought her heartbreak and loss.

She did not want her son to be lost to water.

The crisp-skinned pork, sliced from the roasted pig on the spit, smelled delicious, but she knew it was not for her, not with her remaining teeth loose and her gums sore. Claire filled her plate from a large bowl of soft beans that had been baking all day in a sauce of tomatoes and herbs, and added a piece of soft bread. She would leave room, though, she thought, for a slice of blackberry pie.

She set her plate on a table and eased herself onto a bench next to several others. A pregnant woman smiled at her and moved slightly, making room; Claire recognized her as Jean, the wife of one of the fiddlers who were tuning their instruments and preparing to play for the dancing. Kira was there too, keeping an eye on her toddlers as they played near the table. From time to time she spooned food into their mouths, as if they were baby birds.

Eating slowly, watching the young women at her table, Claire realized that she might have been one of them. She looked down at her own gnarled hand holding a fork. An old woman's hand. Herbalist had told her she was nearing her last days, and she sensed that it was true. But inside herself? She was a young woman still. If she had not made the trade that had brought her here (*Youth!* In her memory Claire could hear still how Trademaster had breathed the word into her ear, had spat against her cheek with it, how she had nodded in assent and whispered to him: *Trade*) she would perhaps be back with Einar now, helping him tend his lambs, cooking a stew they would share in their hillside hut, talking together by the fire in the evenings.

But she would not have found her son. She would never have seen Gabe again, would not have watched him grow into the lively young man he had become. She knew it was a trade she would make again, given the chance.

She rose to return her emptied plate, to get herself a piece of pie, and looked over to the table where the boisterous young boys were sitting together. He was there. She saw him glance sideways at her as she passed; then his attention returned to his plate, heaped as it was with food, and to a lengthy joke one of his friends was telling. In adolescence Gabe was gangly and tall, and as she watched, his elbow knocked over the mug holding his drink; the other boys chortled as he sheepishly mopped up the mess with his napkin.

His hair was curly, as hers—now a sparse bun at the back of her head—had once been. His blue eyes were surprisingly pale. Jonas had the same eyes. So did his wife, Kira. Claire remembered now that she had noticed the unusual eyes when Gabe was an infant. Those early days had come back to her very slowly, and with pain attached to each memory.

The feel of the mask clamped over her face during his birth. She had shuddered when that memory returned.

How, later, she had held him for the first time, and had noticed the startling pale eyes. When she recalled it, she was suffused with a feeling of loss.

Then she remembered a dream she had had, of a hidden light-eyed baby. How, in the dream, she had kept him concealed in a drawer. Thinking of it after all this time, she almost wept at the sadness of all it implied.

She did weep when the next memory came back: of how he had grinned and wiggled his chubby fingers at her. He had learned by then to say her name. *Claire*, he had said in his high voice. And: *Bye-bye*.

She did not regret the trade she had made in order to find him. But she was desperately sad to realize that her time was short now. Instead of the strong and vibrant young woman she should be, the mother Gabe deserved, she was now an ancient hag waiting for death. It was a hideous joke that Trademaster had played on them both seven years before.

The sky darkened as night fell and the music began in earnest. Soon it would be the time for the young people, the time for dancing and flirtation. Claire saw Gabe rise from his seat and make his way over to the pretty freckle-faced girl named Deirdre. He stood self-consciously talking

to her as she helped to clean the tables. She could see that Deirdre was self-conscious too, but that she purposely walked in a way that made her striped skirt twirl and flutter.

Women gathered their dishes and babies in order to take them home. Claire watched Kira with the children. Annabelle was half asleep in her arms, but Matthew was dashing about wildly. Finally Jonas scooped him up and laughed as the overtired two-year-old kicked and cried. Together they gathered their things and called good night, then started down the path from the Pavilion toward their home. Jonas had set Matthew on his shoulders and the couple became silhouettes against the sky as the moon rose and Claire watched.

Although Jonas had no awareness of who she had once been, that once she and he had been contemporaries in the same community, Claire remembered Jonas as a boy. He was too young for fatherhood then; nonetheless, it had been he who had saved a baby sentenced to die because the little one was eager, and curious, and lively. Because he didn't sleep. He was—what was the word?—disruptive. Didn't fit in. Jonas had risked his own life, sacrificed his future, to bring him here. She wondered if he worried about Gabe now, about the frailty of the little boat he was striving to build and the dangers he would face if somehow he launched it into the river.

When she rose from her seat in order to start down the path to her own cottage, her hip had stiffened and she stood for a moment massaging it with her hand before she was able to walk. Finally she started down the gentle hill, carefully feeling her way in the moonlight. How soon she would be gone, Claire thought, and sighed. How little Gabe would ever know about his own past.

Then she stopped, suddenly, and stood still. *Of course,* she thought. She knew what she would do.

She decided she would tell her story, her own history that she had kept so secret until now, to Jonas. Someday, after she was gone, if the time was ever right, when the boy was old enough and ready, he could pass it on to her son.

Six

"*TRADEMASTER?*"

Jonas looked astonished.

He had listened now for a long time. He was sitting with Claire on a bench in a secluded area behind the library. She had thought about how much to tell him, *how* to tell him, and finally, ten days after the feast, she had approached Jonas and asked if she could talk to him alone. He had brought her here late on a damp morning, carefully wiping the moisture from the bench and helping her to sit comfortably.

She hadn't known exactly how to begin. Finally she said, "I knew you when you were a boy."

Jonas smiled. "I didn't realize you were here then. I thought you came to the village more recently. I would have guessed, oh, five or six years ago. But we lose track of time, don't we?"

"No," Claire said. "You're right. I arrived here close to seven years ago. But I had known you long before then. Back in the community where you had grown up."

He looked more closely at her. "I'm sorry not to recognize you," he said. "I was a child there, of course. I left there after I turned twelve. But I did many of my volunteer hours in the House of the Old. Were you there then? I remember a woman named . . . What was it? Larissa? That was it. Did you know her?"

Claire shook her head. "No," she murmured. This was so hard. How could she describe to him something that would be almost impossible to believe?

She sighed, and kneaded her hands, which ached. It was midmorning. Often her joints ached in the morning. She cleared her throat. Her voice, she knew, was an old person's voice now, too soft sometimes, too tentative. But she took a deep breath and tried to speak firmly, to make him listen, to make him understand the incomprehensible.

"My ceremony was three years before yours."

"Your ceremony?"

"The Ceremony of Twelve."

"But—"

She held up her hand. “Shhh. Just listen.”

Jonas, looking confused, fell silent.

“I received my Assignment when I turned twelve. I was assigned Birthmother.” She paused. “That was a disappointment, of course. But I had not been a good student.”

She could see that he was still puzzling over her words. There was nothing to do but go on. “After a while, when I was deemed ready, I moved into the birthing unit.”

Around them, the pace of the village continued. Some women were gossiping as they weeded in the community garden. Nearby, small children played with some puppies. From Boys’ Lodge, the usual group emerged and ran down the path, calling laughing insults to one another. Gabe was not among them. He had gone to his place by the river much earlier and was alone there, fitting the last parts of his odd little boat into place.

All of this fell away from their awareness as Jonas and Claire sat together. She talked. He listened attentively. Now and then he interrupted her softly to ask a question. The pills. When did she stop taking the pills?

“I did too. I just threw them away,” he told her. “Did you feel the change?”

“I felt different from the others. But I was already different in so many ways.”

He nodded. She could tell that he was slowly accepting the story she was telling him. But she saw him look carefully at her, at her thin gray hair, her stooped shoulders and gnarled hands, and knew that he could not comprehend yet how she had become what she now was.

She told him of her work at the fish hatchery, after her discharge from the Birthing Center. Of her search for Gabe, and her visits to him.

She described how the infant had begun to say her name. How he laughed at the funny face she made, and tried to imitate it. Claire thrust her tongue into her cheek and made the face for Jonas.

He looked startled. “I remember it!” he told her. “When he and I were together—you know he stayed in my dwelling at night?”

“I know.”

“Sometimes he made that funny face for me. But of course I didn’t know—” He paused, still trying to comprehend.

She continued her story.

The midday bell rang. Villagers began to gather for lunch. Jonas and Claire ignored it.

"Will Kira be wondering where you are?"

He shook his head. "No. She was taking the children on a picnic with some friends. Please—go on. Unless you're hungry. Would you like to stop for lunch?"

Claire said no. "I don't have much of an appetite anymore."

"You're too thin."

"I eat very little. Herbalist says it's not unusual for someone my age. It's part of the natural process."

"Your age?" Jonas asked. "But you were three years older than I was! What happened?"

"We'll get to that. Then you'll understand."

She went on with the telling. It would take a long time. She felt that in order to understand, he must know every detail.

The day cleared and a pale sun dried the moisture. By late afternoon, the shadows had lengthened and they were sitting in deep shade. The air had turned cool. Jonas had placed his jacket across Claire's shoulders. She was very tired by now, but felt oddly invigorated by relating the story to someone at last. It had been her secret, her private burden, for years. She told it slowly, and he didn't hurry her. Now and then she had paused to rest. He had brought her water, and a biscuit. The entire day had belonged to them and to her story.

She described the torturous climb up the cliff at length, feeling the need to relive it inch by inch as Einar had told her he had, remembering each handhold, each precipice and narrow ledge. Talking slowly, she felt the muscles in her arms and legs respond to the memory. Jonas noticed it, how she shifted her body as in her mind she made the climb again. He winced when she told of the attack by the bird. She showed him the scar on her neck.

Finally, as exhausted almost by the telling as she had been when she reached the top of the cliff that long-ago dawn, she described the terrible trade she had made.

Jonas leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and put his face into his hands. "Trademaster," he said. "I thought he was gone. We banished him

from the village a long time ago. I was Leader then."

"Who is he?" Claire asked.

He didn't respond. He stayed silent, looking now into a distant place, a place that Claire couldn't see.

"I should have known," he said, after a moment. "I felt something out there, something related to Gabe, but I didn't realize what it was. I think I was feeling your presence," he mused, "and that was puzzling, but benign. But there is something else. Something malignant. It must be *him.*"

"Who *is* he?" Claire asked again.

"He is Evil. I don't know how else to describe it. He is Evil, and like all evil, he has enormous power. He tempts. He taunts. And he takes.

"Gabe has your same eyes," Claire said suddenly. "You and Gabe have the same pale eyes."

"My eyes?" he said, answering her. "They see beyond the places most people can see. I'm told it's my gift, that there are others with different gifts. And yes, Gabe has the same eyes. Sometimes I wonder—"

From the top of a pine tree near the river, a large bird suddenly lifted itself and swooped past them in the late golden light.

"Were you scared of birds at first?" Claire asked him suddenly.

"What?"

"When you ran away from the community. When you first saw birds. Were you scared?"

Jonas nodded. "Just at first. And other things too. I remember the first time I saw a fox. Gabe was so little; he wasn't afraid of anything. It was all new and exciting to him."

Claire realized suddenly that he was talking to her in a different way. He had known her since she had arrived in the community and he had always spoken to her in a kindly fashion. He had been helpful and patient: a young man to an old woman. But they had never been more than acquaintances. Now they were reminiscing together as old friends who had just reunited.

"I thought of taking him," she confessed. "But I didn't know how to hide him, or where I could go. And then your father showed me that he wore a special bracelet on his ankle, so I realized that I'd be caught if I tried to take him."

"Yes. An electronic bracelet."

Claire frowned. "I don't remember what that means. What it was."

“There was so much in the community that isn’t part of our lives anymore. But that’s what our memories consist of: small things,” Jonas said.

“My bicycle. I haven’t seen a bicycle since then. Except the one in the museum. That was—”

“My father’s bike. I stole it. It had a seat for Gabe.”

Claire nodded. “Yes. In my memory I can see him riding in it. He held a toy.”

Jonas laughed. “His hippo.”

“He called it Po, didn’t he? It’s coming back now.”

“Yes. Po.”

Now she could almost hear and see it: the dimpled hands clutching the stuffed toy; the high, happy voice. “Did you take the hippo with you when you escaped?”

Jonas shook his head. “I couldn’t. It all happened so fast. I discovered they were going to release . . . No. Not *release.* They were going to kill Gabe. I took him and fled. And I had to take food. There was no room for anything else.”

“I would have gone with you, if I’d known. Things would be different now if I had.” She shifted on the bench and rubbed her sore hip. “I wish—” But then she fell silent.

Jonas was quiet. He didn’t reply.

“I was so frightened of birds,” she said suddenly. “Of their feathers and beaks. Then Einar brought me one, in a cage, as a pet. I named it Yellow-wing.”

“Einar? He was the one who—”

“Yes, the one who prepared me for the climb out.” Her eyes went to her feet, thick and bunioned in primitive sandals. She pulled them back beneath the bench to hide them. He knew she was remembering how limber she had been then, how balanced and sure.

“I loved Einar,” she told him.

“Do you wish you had stayed?” Jonas asked her after a moment.

“No,” she said firmly. “But I wish it had not been Evil that brought me here.”

Jonas helped her up from the bench, his hand under her arm. They had been sitting together for a long time, and Claire was stiff. She stretched

slowly and took a deep breath.

"Are you all right?" he asked, looking at her with concern.

She nodded. "I'll be all right in a minute. My heart's fluttery sometimes. And I'm just a little slow to get moving."

Jonas continued looking at her. "I remember you," he said, after a moment.

"We never spoke to each other," Claire pointed out.

They began to walk slowly. He was seeing her home.

"No. But I saw you. My father mentioned you—the girl who came now and then to the nurturing center, and played with Gabe. He pointed you out to me one time. I think you rode past on your bike, and he said, 'That's the one.'"

"It seems so strange, to realize who you are. He pointed you out to me: 'That's my son,' he said. He told me your name. It brings it all back, those days in the community."

"I don't think about it anymore. I've made a life here, where it's so different."

"So has Gabe."

Jonas nodded. "He doesn't remember the community."

"It's just as well."

"I'm not certain. It frustrates him, not having a past, or a family."

"So he's wondered?"

"More than wondered," Jonas told her. "He has a passionate need to figure out his past. I try to tell him what he wants to know, but it's never been enough. That's why he's building the boat. I told him we had lived by a river, perhaps this same river. He's determined to find his way back."

They both fell silent.

"Then we must—"

"Maybe together we—"

They had both spoken at the same time, and they were both saying the same thing: *We must try to tell all of this to Gabe. Together we can help him understand.* But there was not time to discuss it. They were interrupted by the shouts of boys, excited, perhaps alarmed. The noise was coming from the riverside, the place where Gabe had been working for weeks on the little boat.

Seven

GABE HADN'T WANTED an audience for the launch. He wasn't certain the boat was completely ready, and he didn't want to be humiliated if anything went wrong. His plan was to sneak away alone. Yesterday he had moved the boat closer to the water, shoving it across some underbrush. Now it was lying on a low, muddy section of the bank. The paddle was resting diagonally inside.

The picture in his book, the book he had borrowed from Jonas, showed the lone man in the ocean, lying doomed in his small boat. His arms were taut and muscled, but useless; it was clear that the huge waves were going to be the ruin of him. He had no paddle, Gabe had thought, looking intently at the painting. Maybe he lost it. Or maybe he forgot to bring one? There was no way the man could save himself in that overwhelming sea. He needed a paddle.

For a foolish moment Gabe focused intensely and tried to veer into the picture of the painted man, to know how it felt to be afloat, to be about to die in the sea—and to know it while safe himself, able to end the veer when he chose. Just to feel the fear briefly, and the movement of the churning waves.

But it didn't work. The man was not real. He was the painter's idea of a man, simply daubs of paint, nothing more. A painted man who needed a paddle.

Gabe was proud of the paddle he had made. He was proud of the entire boat, but he realized it was a rough, primitive construction. The paddle was different. He had felt very fortunate to have found a slender young cedar that broadened at its base: just the right potential for his plan. Carefully he had cut the tree down and then shaped the paddle from its trunk. It seemed to take forever. But he carried it back and forth to Boys' Lodge and was able to work on it there in the evenings: carving carefully, smoothing, shaping. His friends, even those who ridiculed his boat, were impressed with the paddle, with its sweet, cedary smell, its graceful curved edges, and the sheen of its wood now that he had rubbed it with oil.

"Can I carve my name on it? Just small, but so you can remember me?" Nathaniel had asked. Gabe had agreed, and watched while his friend

carved his name meticulously.

Then Simon asked, and Tarik, and others. Even those boys who had made fun of his project now took pains to add their signature.

Watching them, Gabe found that he could make tiny veers into each of the boys as they bent over the paddle, carving carefully. He could feel their feelings.

I don't think he'll make it, he felt Nathaniel worrying. *He might die in the river.*

I hope he finds his mother, he felt from Tarik. *He wants it so badly.*

He's something of a fool. But he's courageous, I'll say that for him. I wish I had his courage. Gabe was surprised to feel that from Simon, who had been scornful of the whole project.

At the last, he had shyly asked Jonas to carve his name as well. He felt Jonas's fear for him, but Jonas gave no sign. His face was calm, and he smiled when he handed the paddle back with his name inscribed.

He had left a rounded knob at one end for a handhold. The other end fanned out into a broad triangle. He had stood on the bank by the water and dipped it in, pulling it through to feel the river's resistance. It required strength. But Gabe was strong. In recent months he had begun to fill out; his muscles were firm and his energy boundless.

He had been delayed after lunch by some chores he had left undone. Grumpily he folded his laundry, put it away, and straightened his room. Now, heading back to the river, he assessed the weather. The misty morning had cleared and through the clouds a bit of sun made a narrow glint of light. The river would be smooth, Gabe thought. Sometimes after a storm it became turbulent and dangerous. He wasn't worried. His boat could manage, he was certain. But for this first test, he was glad of the calm weather; he would take it slow. He needed to learn how exactly to wield the paddle, how to steer. He flexed one arm, admired his own bicep, and wondered if Deirdre would ever notice. Then he blushed, embarrassed that he had even thought such a foolish thing.

"Gabe!"

"Hey, Gabe!"

He recognized Tarik's voice. Then Simon's, and Nathaniel's. They had spotted him on the path. Annoyed, Gabe stopped and waited. They had guessed what he was doing. His whole group from Boys' Lodge caught up with him, just Simon and Tarik at first; then they were joined by the

others, who came running. “You going to do it, Gabe? Put it in the water? Can we watch?”

“We’ll be your rescuers!” Tarik suggested.

He had wanted to be alone for this. Too late now. Well, let them watch. When the time came, the *real* time, the time when he would leave for good—he would do it alone. Maybe at night. He’d leave a note at Boys’ Lodge. A separate note for Jonas, he thought, with a thank-you; Jonas had done his best for Gabe. Deirdre? No, that would be foolish. No note for Deirdre. Let her wonder about him always.

For now, though, no notes. This was just a practice. What was it they called it, in that book about boats? A sea trial. That’s what it would be.

“Hey, Gabe?” Simon saw the coiled rope beside his little shed. Gabe had tied stacks of boards together in order to drag them into place. He planned to return the rope soon.

“What?”

“How about if you tie one end of this rope to the boat, and we’ll hold the other end when you push off? Then if you have any kind of trouble, we can haul you back in!”

Gabe scowled at Simon. “Like a baby with a toy boat in the pond?”

“No, I meant—”

“Forget it, Simon. Leave the rope where it is. I borrowed it from Jonas. He wants it back.

“Anybody who wants to help? Give me a hand pushing it into the water.” Several of the boys came eagerly to the bank where the boat was wedged in the slick mud.

“But listen, Gabe!” Nathaniel sounded worried. “Maybe you should at least take the rope with you in the boat. Because when you want to come ashore, you’ll need to grab something. Maybe you could make a noose in the rope and throw it over a tree stump or a bush.”

“Yeah, he’s right, Gabe!” someone else said.

Gabe stood beside his boat, furious. They were ruining everything, crowding around, criticizing, predicting disaster.

“Look there, where these two boards don’t quite come together,” a boy named Stefan said suddenly. “Won’t water come in through that crack?” He pointed.

Gabe glanced to where Stefan was pointing. He had meant to fill that wide crack with thick mud and let it dry and harden. “When the boards get

wet," he said, "they'll expand and come together there."

Stefan looked skeptical. "But what if—"

"Look," Gabe said impatiently. "If you're going to be all worried about it, I'll stuff something in the gap. Hand me that rag." He gestured toward the piece of cloth he had used to oil the paddle. It was lying near the shed. Stefan tossed it to him, and Gabe ripped it into strips. Then he stuffed one wadded strip of cloth into the space between the boards. "There," he said. "Happy?"

Stefan glanced nervously at the others standing on the bank. Simon shrugged. Nathaniel looked very worried. Tarik grinned. "Sure," he said. "Happy."

"Happy to see you sink," muttered one boy, and several others laughed.

Gabe ignored them now. He was concentrating on moving the boat into the water from its muddy resting place. His hands were slippery on the rounded wood. He leaned his shoulder against it and pushed. Several of the boys were pushing as well, and with a sudden lurch the bottom of the boat lifted from the mud and moved forward into the water. Gabe leapt in, tumbling onto his backside, and grabbed the paddle.

The river water was very still here at the shallow edge. Gabe raised himself first to his knees; then he stood upright, holding the paddle against the wooden floor of the boat for balance. He hadn't anticipated that it would rock and tip the way it was, but he spread his bare feet for balance. He was still quite near the shore, and he forgot his anger and impatience in the triumph of the moment when he was finally standing upright without faltering. In a moment he would kneel and begin to steer with the paddle. But for now, it seemed appropriate to stand tall, to raise one hand from the paddle and salute his friends, who were watching apprehensively. They grinned.

Then, to his surprise, the boat began to rotate. Now he was no longer facing the shore and his friends; he was looking out toward the center of the river and across to the trees on the opposite bank.

Well, of course, he thought, realizing that he wasn't steering it yet. He knelt. Balancing awkwardly, he raised the paddle and dipped it into the water. He had practiced this, pulling the water with the broadened end, and he knew how it felt, so the resistance didn't surprise him. Leaning forward, he pulled the paddle against the current, and the boat responded slightly,

revolving a bit, so that again he saw the boys, but they were farther from him now. The river was drawing him outward, away from the bank.

He had planned this. This was his time to practice controlling the boat, propelling and steering it. With the paddle, he moved it slightly toward the bank he had just left. But the river pulled him farther out again. *All right,* he thought. *I need to steer faster.* He took several long pulls with the paddle and brought himself, again, closer to shore, but he was moving with the current down the river, and a group of young alders were hiding the boys from him now.

He realized it would be hard to get back to them. The current was pulling him away from where they stood.

"Are you all right?" He recognized Nathaniel's voice.

"Yes," he called back. "I'm just figuring out how the paddle works!"

The boat spun slightly and tilted. It was hard for him to regain his balance. He planted his knees and feet. He realized suddenly that they were wet—not from the damp mud of the riverbank, but from water that was streaming in through cracks between the boards. He tried to aim for shore, pulling through the water with his paddle, but the boat felt heavier now, with water in it.

He could hear the boys' voices, shouting, getting closer to him. He realized that his friends were running along the riverbank, following him as he moved, the boat twirling clumsily out of control. The water had risen and covered his lower legs. The paddle seemed more and more useless as a steering device. Finally, angrily, he plunged it straight downward through the water and felt it scrape the bottom. It slowed the boat. Through the bushes the boys appeared, calling to him.

"Here!" Tarik shouted. "I brought the rope! If I throw it to you, we can pull you to shore!"

Gabe knew what he wanted to call back. He wanted to call: *Don't bother! I can paddle myself to shore!* But it wasn't true. The paddle was stuck in the muddy bottom of the river and it was, at the moment, precariously holding the boat still. But the swirling water was rising.

"All right, throw it!"

At least he caught the rope on the first throw so he wasn't additionally humiliated. He wrapped it around his wrist and waited until Tarik had found a firm footing on the riverbank. Two other boys reached for the rope as well, and when Gabe called, "Now!" they pulled as he lifted the paddle

that had held him still. The boat swayed and the water sloshed around his lower body. Gradually it moved to shore.

When he looked up as the bottom of the boat scraped against the rocks at the shallow edge, he saw Jonas there as well, looking concerned.

"It needs work," he muttered as he climbed out. He tied one end of the rope to the boat, threading it through a gap between some boards near the top. He took the other end from Tarik and looked around for a tree trunk to tie it to.

"Boys," he heard Jonas say, "it's time to start getting ready for supper. You go on. I'll stay here with Gabe. Thanks for your help."

Gabe knotted the rope around the slender trunk of a nearby sapling and glanced back at the small, leaky failure of a boat that he had been so proud of a short time before. It was smeared with mud and the torn rag was dangling from the gap he had stuffed it into.

Jonas was waiting for him, standing silently, his expression sympathetic.

"I don't know why I'm tying it up. I should just let it float out there and sink." Gabe's voice was shaking with tears very near the surface. He wiped his wet, dirt-smeared hands on his dripping shorts and climbed the bank to face the man who was the closest thing he had to a father.

"I'm sorry," Jonas said.

"It's not even a real boat. It's just a bunch of boards tied together. That's all it is." He wiped his face with one dirty hand and looked angrily at Jonas, defying him to disagree.

"It floated, though," he added.

"Yes. It did float."

"And my paddle really worked well."

All that work. The weeks and weeks of planning, of building, of hoping. And all he could say now was that the paddle worked well. Gabe felt it all slipping away: his dream of returning, of finding his mother, of becoming part of something he had yearned for all his life. He had envisioned a triumphant return to the place where his life had begun. He had daydreamed about being recognized and greeted: *"Look! It's Gabriel!"* In his imagination he had seen his mother running, her arms outstretched to enfold him as he stepped smiling from his sturdy little vessel.

The river still surged past. It moved and churned, foaming and dark, carrying leaves and sand and twigs from one place to the next. What a fool

he had been, to think that it could have carried him as well.

Angrily he kicked at the boat, then turned away.

"Come with me, Gabe. You can come back to my house and get cleaned up there. Kira will give us some supper and we can talk. There's something important I need to tell you."

Gabe scowled at his ruined boat one more time. Then, grudgingly, he climbed the slippery bank. Carrying his paddle, he followed Jonas to the path that led back to the village.

Eight

"DO YOU REMEMBER Trade Mart, Gabe?"

"Yes, sort of. Though they didn't let children go. You had to be older than twelve."

"Thank goodness for that," Jonas said.

Gabe reached toward the plate and took another cookie. Kira was a wonderful cook. The cookies she had served for dessert were crisp and studded with dried fruits and nuts. He hadn't been counting really, but he thought this was his sixth.

Gabe and Jonas were seated together on the pillow-strewn couch. Gabe had had a bath and Jonas had provided him with clean clothes. He was glad he hadn't had to go back to Boys' Lodge after the boat disaster. The other boys would have made jokes about it. They probably would for weeks to come. But at least for now, this first evening, he wouldn't have to listen and try to smile.

Kira was tucking the children into bed. Gabe had watched her with them earlier, as she fed them their supper and wiped their smeared, sleepy faces, talking softly to them about the nice day they had had, about a picnic, and the flowers they had picked. In a small earthen pot on the table, the bouquet of yellow loosestrife, purple coneflowers, and lacy ferns cast a shadow against the wall in the dimming light.

Gabe had little interest in babies. He would rather talk to Frolic, the old, overweight dog asleep on the floor, than to Matthew and Annabelle, with their grabby hands and screechy giggles. He was relieved when Kira finally took them off to bed. It amused him that Jonas kissed their sweaty little necks and called night-night affectionately as they toddled off with their mother.

But still. *Still.* He felt an enormous sadness that he didn't entirely understand, when he watched Kira with her children. He felt a loss, a hole in his own life. Had anyone—all right: any *woman*—ever murmured to him that way, or brushed crumbs gently from his cheek? Had anyone ever *mothered* him? Jonas had told him no. "A manufactured product," Jonas had said, describing his origins sadly.

But he thought he remembered something else. A dim blur, that's all; but it was there. Someone had held him, had whispered to him. Someone had loved him once. He was sure of it. He was sure he could find it. Could find *her.* If only the stupid boat . . .

"Try to stay awake, Gabe. I know it's been a long day. But I want to talk to you."

He had been drifting off. Gabe shook himself fully awake and took another sip from his cup of tea. "About Trade Mart?" he asked. "I barely remember it. Just listening to people talk about it. It was creepy in some way. But kind of exciting. We always wanted to sneak in, me and the other boys."

"It had been going on for years," Jonas described. "I never paid much attention to it until I became Leader. Then I began to see that . . ." He paused when Kira came into the room, carrying a cup of tea. She sat down in a nearby chair.

"I'm telling Gabe about Trade Mart."

Kira nodded. "I wasn't here then," she told Gabe, "but Jonas has described it to me." She made a face and shivered slightly. "Scary."

Gabe didn't say anything. He wondered why they were talking about an event that had ended years before.

"It had always seemed to me like a simple entertainment," Jonas said. "Everyone got dressed up. There was a lot of merriment to their preparations. But as I got older I began to sense that there was always a nervousness to it, an uneasiness. So when I became Leader I began going, to watch."

Gabe yawned. "So what happened, exactly?" he asked politely.

"It was a kind of ritualized thing. Every now and then this man appeared in the village—he always wore strange clothes, and talked in an odd, convoluted way. He was called Trademaster. He got up on the stage and called people forward one by one. Then he invited them to make trades."

"Trades?" Gabe asked. "Meaning what?"

"Well, people would tell him what they most wanted. They'd say it loudly. Everyone could hear. And then they told him what they were willing to trade for it. But they whispered that part."

Gabe looked puzzled. "Give me an example," he said.

"Suppose it was your turn. You would go to the stage, and tell Trademaster what you wanted most. What might you ask for?"

Gabe hesitated. He couldn't put into words, really, the thing he truly wanted. Finally he shrugged. "A good boat, I guess."

"And then you would whisper to him what you were willing to trade away in order to get it."

Gabe made a face. "I don't *have* anything."

"Most people think that. And they thought that, then. But they found otherwise. He suggested to them that they trade *parts of themselves*."

Gabe sat up straighter, more awake, intrigued now. "Like a finger or something? Or an ear? There's a woman here in the village who only has one ear. The other got chopped off before she came here. As punishment for something, I think. There are places that do those kinds of horrible punishments."

"I know. And I know the woman you mean. You're right. She escaped from a place with a cruel government.

"But Trademaster was asking for something different. You had to trade —let me think how to describe it—part of your basic character."

"Like what?"

"Well, if you wanted a boat, he'd be able to provide that. But let's think about your character, Gabe. You're—what? Energetic, I'd say."

"And smart. I do pretty well in school."

"Honest. Likable."

"Well, I'm honest. That's true. I'm not always likable. I'm pretty mean to Simon sometimes."

Jonas chuckled. "Well, you're energetic. Agreed?"

"Yes. I'm energetic."

"Let's use that, just for the example. Suppose Trademaster could give you a really fine boat, Gabe. You'd have to trade for it, though. You'd have to trade your energy. You'd be on the stage. He'd whisper to you what the trade would consist of. No one would be able to hear. Just you. But then he'd say loudly: *'Trade?'* And you'd have to reply."

"Easy. A fine boat? I'd say, 'Trade!'"

"He'd write it down."

"And I'd get my boat."

"You would. I never knew of anyone asking for a boat, so I don't know how it would appear. But he had amazing powers. Probably a fine boat would be waiting for you the next day, at the river."

"Yes!" Gabe was wide awake now, fascinated by the thought of how easily he might have obtained a boat.

"But don't forget: you would have made a trade for it. And your energy would have been taken from you. You might wake up the next morning and be unable to get out of bed."

"So I'd rest for a day till I felt energetic."

"Gabe, Trademaster has enormous power. He could take your energy permanently."

"So I'd be in a wheeled chair or something for the rest of my life?"

"Could be."

"All right, that wouldn't work. I wouldn't trade my energy."

"But what would your other choices be?"

Gabe thought. "Honesty. Smartness. I could maybe trade one of those."

"Think about it."

"Well, I could trade my honesty. Then I'd be a dishonest person, but I'd have a really good boat." He shrugged. "That might work."

Jonas laughed. "Anyway," he said, "that's what Trade Mart was all about. It began to corrupt the people of the village. They traded away the best parts of themselves, the way you would have, in order get the foolish things they thought they wanted, or needed."

"A boat isn't foolish," Gabe argued. He yawned.

Jonas got up and went to where the teakettle was simmering. He made himself another cup of tea. "Kira? Tea?" he asked, but she shook her head.

"Take my word for it, Gabe," he said when he sat back down. "Trademaster was taking control of this village. And he was pure evil. It became clear when Matty died. That was the end of Trade Mart."

Gabe saw that Kira had put her hands to her face. She had been very close to Matty.

They all were silent for a moment. Outside, it had begun to rain. They could hear it against the roof. Then Jonas said, "I want to talk to you, Gabe, about powers."

"Powers?" Gabe suddenly felt uneasy. They were entering a realm that they had approached before.

"Maybe a better word is 'gifts.' I have a certain power, or gift. It became apparent when I was young, twelve or so. I was able to focus on something and will myself to see . . ."

He sighed, and looked at Kira. “I don’t know how to describe this to him,” he said.

Kira tried. “Jonas can see *beyond,* Gabe. He can see to another place. But he has to work very hard at it. It depletes him.”

“And the power is ebbing,” Jonas added. “I can feel that it’s leaving me. Kira is experiencing the same thing.”

“You mean she has a gift too?”

“Mine’s different. Mine has always been through my hands,” Kira explained. “I realized it the way Jonas did, when I was young. My hands began to be able to do things—to *make* things—that an ordinary pair of hands can’t. But now . . .”

She smiled. “It’s leaving me, as well. And that’s all right. I think Jonas and I don’t need these gifts anymore. We’ve used them to create our life here. We’ve helped others. And our time of such powers is passing now. But we’ve talked about you, Gabe. We feel certain that you have some kind of gift.”

“I felt it when you were very young, Gabe,” Jonas said. “When I took you and escaped the place where we were. I’ve been waiting for it to make itself known to you.” He looked at Gabe as if something might become apparent at that moment. Gabe shifted uncomfortably on the couch.

“Well,” he said finally, “it’s not a gift for boatbuilding, is it?”

Jonas chuckled. “No,” he said. “But you’re very determined. That serves you well. And I think you’re going to need that determination, and your energy—in fact, *all* your attributes—plus whatever special gift you haven’t discovered yet—”

I have discovered it, Gabe thought. *I can veer.* But he stayed silent. He simply didn’t feel ready to tell them.

“—because you have a hard job ahead of you,” Jonas continued.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m going to use the last of my own power,” Jonas said. “I’m going to see beyond one final time.”

“Why?” asked Kira, startled.

Gabe echoed her. “Why?”

“I have to find out where Trademaster is,” Jonas told them both. “He’s still out there somewhere. He’s quite near. And he’s terribly dangerous.”

The rain had become louder, drenching, and a wind had risen. Tree branches whipped against the side of the house. Kira rose suddenly from

her chair and pulled a window closed. Jonas paid no attention. “And Gabe?” he said. “When I find him . . .”

Gabe waited. He was wide awake now.

“It’s going to be up to you, then. You must destroy him.”

“*Me?* Why me? He’s nothing to do with me!”

Jonas took a deep breath. “It’s everything to do with you, Gabe. But it’s a very long story. I was going to tell it to you tonight, but I can see how tired you are. And it’s late. Let’s get some sleep now. And in the morning I’ll explain it to you.”

Nine

THE LEAVES DRIPPED onto the wet grass, but the rain had stopped and a pale sun had risen. It was late morning now and Gabe was just waking. He had slept fitfully on the couch until finally, nudged awake by the houshold noises, he yawned and opened his eyes. He watched Kira tending the children. In her soft voice she spoke firmly to Matthew, who was trying to grab a toy from his sister. Annabelle held it tightly in her fist and looked defiantly at her brother. “No!” she said.

Kira laughed. When she saw that Gabe was awake, she turned away from the little ones.

“How are you feeling?” she asked. “You slept a long time.”

Gabe nodded. He looked around the room. “I’m all right. I had strange dreams. I’m sorry I slept so late. You should have woken me. Is Jonas here?”

“No. He had to leave.”

“But he promised to explain—”

“I know. And he will. But he got an urgent message early this morning. Someone in the village is quite sick.”

“Why did they call for him? He’s not a healer. They usually call Herbalist.”

Kira shrugged. “I’m not sure. Apparently she asked for him. Are you hungry? The children just had some bread and jam. Would you like some?”

Gabe went to the table. She poured milk into a thick cup for him. He drank some and spread raspberry jam on the crusty, freshly baked bread. He watched when she turned her attention again to the toddlers.

“Do you think they’ll remember this moment when they’re older?” he asked suddenly.

“Fighting over a toy? Eating bread and jam? Probably not. They’re too little for specific memories like that. But I think they’ll remember the general feeling of being taken care of, of being scolded now and then, maybe of being held and hugged.” She poured more milk into his empty cup. “Why?”

“I don’t know. I just wondered.”

“I think I remember being very small and sleeping beside my mother. When I think of it, I feel her warmth. And I think maybe she sang to me. I suppose I was just about the age of Annabelle.” Kira smiled. “I didn’t walk when I was her age. It took me a long time to walk because of my leg.”

One of her legs was twisted. It was why she leaned on a stick when she walked. He glanced at her, at the stick, when she spoke of it. But his mind was not on that.

“I don’t have a single memory like that.”

“What *do* you remember, Gabe?” Kira asked him.

“I rode in a seat on the back of a bike. You know that bicycle in the museum?”

“Of course.”

“I remember that, a little. But it was Jonas who brought me here on that bike. He wasn’t my parent. I don’t remember a mother, the way you do, the way Annabelle and Matthew will. Except . . .”

He paused.

“Except what?”

Gabe squirmed on his chair. “There was a woman. I *know* there was. And she loved me.”

Kira smiled. “Of course she did.”

“Kira, I mean I *really* know. Last night, when you and Jonas were talking about your gifts . . .”

She looked at him. “Yes?”

“I didn’t want to tell you. I don’t know why. Maybe I just needed to test it one more time.”

“Test what?” Kira glanced toward the children, who were now playing quietly. She came to the table and sat down in the chair next to Gabe.

“My gift. I do have one. I call it *veering.*”

“Go on.”

“At first it just happened. It always surprised me. But then I found I could choose the time. I could direct it. I could cause it to happen. Was it that way for you?”

Kira nodded. “Yes. It was.”

“And this morning, just a few minutes ago, you were over there, with the children—” Gabe nodded toward the corner of the room where the two little ones were industriously piling blocks into towers. “I was lying on the couch, half awake, watching, and I decided to veer into Matthew.”

“Into Matthew?” Kira looked puzzled.

“Yes, because he’s the boy. I suppose it’s not that different with a girl, but I needed to know how it felt to be a small boy looking at his mother.”

They both glanced over at Matthew. His tongue was wedged between his lips and he was frowning with concentration as he balanced a blue wooden triangle on top of a pile of square red blocks.

“So I concentrated really hard. The first thing that happens is a silence. You were talking to the children, showing them how the blocks fit together, and just as you said, ‘See the shapes?’ You were holding up a yellow one, and—”

“Yes. Annabelle took it from me,” Kira said.

“Maybe. I don’t remember that, because the silence happened. I never notice what’s happening when the silence comes. But then I, ah, well, I veered into Matthew. I entered Matthew.”

“You never moved from the couch.”

“No, my body doesn’t move. But my awareness shifts.”

Kira nodded.

“And then,” Gabe went on, “I became part of Matthew’s feelings at that moment. I *felt* them. I *understood* them.”

“So your gift is understanding how someone feels?”

“More than understanding it. *Feeling* it. And this morning, when I did that, I felt my own little self, my baby self, experiencing what Matthew was experiencing at that moment. He was receiving so much love from his mother.”

Kira, beginning to understand, nodded. “For Matthew, that was coming from me. But for you, Gabe, you were remembering . . .”

“Yes. I don’t know her name or where she is now. But I know for certain who she was.”

The two of them sat silently, watching the children play.

Later, after he had helped her clean up the lunch dishes, Kira said, “I’m going to take the children for a walk. Want to come?” She lifted two small jackets from a hook on the wall.

“When’s Jonas coming back?”

“I don’t know. I’m surprised that he’s been gone so long.”

“Is it all right if I wait here for him?”

“Of course. You and he have a lot to talk about.”

Gabe looked through the window, down at the winding paths that crisscrossed the village. People hurried along, busy with midday tasks. Beyond the orchard, he could see the library; it appeared closed. Nearby, in the playing field, children were running around with a ball that they passed back and forth; he could hear their shouts. It was an ordinary day in the quiet, well-ordered place. Yet someplace in the village, someone was very ill, and Jonas was there.

"I think I'll go look for him," Gabe said suddenly. "Do you know where he went? Who is it who is so sick?"

Kira reached into a small sleeve and guided Annabelle's chubby arm through. "Other side now," she said to the little girl, and held open the other sleeve. "Can you do yours by yourself?" she asked Matthew, whose jacket was on the floor in front of him. He grinned and shook his head no.

"A woman named Claire," she said to Gabe, in answer to his question. "I'm sure you've seen her in the village. She's very, very old."

"Oh, *her!* Yes, I've seen her often."

"Well, I fear you won't be seeing her much longer. It sounds as if her time is running out." With both children now buttoned into their jackets, Kira headed to the door with Annabelle in her arms and Matthew by one hand. "Can you open the door for me?"

"Is it all right if I leave my paddle here?" He looked toward the corner where it was propped against the wall. The sunlight made it gleam golden.

"Of course. I won't let the children play with it."

Gabe helped her through the door and down the front steps. "Do you know where she lives? Or is she in the infirmary?"

"Jonas went to her house. It's over there someplace." Kira indicated, nodding her head, a place beyond the library, beyond the schoolhouse. He could see the small cottages, deep in shade, that dotted the wooded area.

Gabe thanked her quickly for the place to eat and sleep after such a bad day. Then, as Kira headed with the children to the play area nearby, he began to jog toward the place where Claire lived and where Jonas was with her now. He wanted to talk more about what Jonas had proposed last night. It had been on his mind since he had awakened. He was to *kill* someone named Trademaster? It made no sense. Jonas was a peaceful, compassionate man. All right, maybe this Trademaster guy was bad. Maybe even pure evil! But he wasn't bothering anyone they knew. They

would watch out for him, would fend him off if he showed signs of trying to return to the village and do harm.

Hah, Gabe thought with a wry smile. *Maybe they should just put him into my stupid boat and give it a firm shove into the river.*

The little cottage was deep in a thicket of trees, but he had no trouble finding the place where Claire lived. Several aged women stood somberly outside, murmuring to one another.

"So sudden," he overheard one woman say to another. "Came upon her just like that. She was fine last night."

"Happens that way," a tall white-haired woman said knowingly, and several others nodded.

Gabe excused himself politely as he passed them. "Is Jonas inside?" he asked. A woman nodded.

"She asked for him, first thing. Strange," she murmured.

"Is it all right if I go in?" Gabe asked.

No one seemed to be in charge. They all looked at him blankly, and he took it as permission. The door stood partially open, and he entered after a quiet knock on the wood, which drew no reply. The interior was very dim. It was bright outside on this clear day after the night's rain, but the windows of the cottage were small, and woven curtains were drawn across. He smelled stale food, old age, dried herbs, and dust.

Herbalist, who ordinarily tended the sick, sat quietly in a rocking chair.

Gabe looked around. "Jonas?"

"Over here." He followed the voice and found Jonas sitting in the shadows beside the bed. Again he wondered: *Why?* Why had the old woman asked for Jonas?

And how soon could Jonas excuse himself and come away? Gabe needed to talk to him. Their conversation last night had seemed urgent. More than urgent; it had been alarming. Jonas, the most peaceful of souls, seemed to be commanding Gabe to commit a murder. He had not explained, not really. He had said they would discuss it more fully in the morning.

Now morning had passed, and Gabe wanted to know more. The old woman was dying, as old people always do. It was the natural way of things. Her friends were nearby, and Herbalist was sitting in the corner. She didn't need Jonas. Not as much as Gabe did.

“Can’t you leave?” Gabe whispered, moving closer. “We need to talk. You promised to explain—”

“Shhh.” Jonas held up a hand.

Now, through the dim light, he could see Jonas more clearly, and the woman in the bed as well. Her eyes were open, and it was clear that she had seen Gabe approaching. Her thin fingers moved, plucking at the blanket. Jonas was watching her very closely; now he leaned forward, as if to listen. Her thin, dry lips were moving. Gabe could not hear, at first, what she said. But Jonas did. Jonas was nodding.

Gabe stood there uncertainly. The woman’s mouth began to move again, and he found himself leaning forward to listen. This time, nearer, he could hear her words.

“Tell him,” she was saying to Jonas.

Ten

"I'M SORRY. I just don't believe you."

Gabe's voice was both skeptical and firm.

Jonas leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. He cupped his own face with his hands. They were sitting together on the bench behind the library, the same bench where he had so recently sat with Claire.

He looked up and sighed. "I felt the same way yesterday when she told it to me. I sat here thinking: *This woman is crazy.* Is that what you're thinking now of *me*, Gabe?"

Gabe shook his head and looked away. He wanted to be someplace else. Off with his lodge-mates. Building another boat. *Sinking* another boat. He didn't care. Anywhere but here, listening to this unbelievable story being told to him by a man he loved. And last night this same man had talked of the need to destroy someone. It was scary. It was sad.

He turned to Jonas and tried to speak in a soothing voice. "You know what? You've been working awfully hard. Probably reading too much. You should take a long walk along the river. Have a nice relaxing, restful . . ."

"Gabe. Listen to me! We don't have much time. This is not a wild made-up thing. This is *real*. She remembers you. She remembers me. She —" Jonas paused and took a deep breath. "I know you were very young when we left the community, so you won't recall these things. But I do, Gabe. I remember *seeing* her there. She used to work at the fish hatchery. But in her spare time she came to the nurturing center and helped out. She did that because you were there, Gabe.

"She had given birth to you. It's the way things were done there. Young girls produced babies—they weren't called babies; they were called newchildren. The birthmothers turned them out like factory products. Then the babies were moved to the nurturing center, and eventually assigned to couples who applied for children."

"That's how your parents got you?" Gabe asked.

Jonas nodded.

"So some girl had given birth to you?"

"Yes."

"But you don't know who?"

Jonas shook his head.

"And some other girl—or maybe it was the same one?—gave birth to *me* years later—"

"*Claire* gave birth to you. You were the only child she ever had."

"But you're saying she ended up working in the fish place."

Jonas nodded. "Yes, they determined that she couldn't handle any more births. She had difficulty when you were born. So they gave her another job. But she spent all her time watching over you. She *loved* you, Gabe. But love wasn't permitted."

Gabe leaned down, slipped off one of the sandals he was wearing, and dislodged a pebble that had been rubbing against his toe. He watched a bird flutter in a nearby tree, and noticed that it had a twig in its beak. He examined a scratch on his arm. He yawned, and stretched. He unbuttoned and rebuttoned the neck of his shirt. He investigated his fingernails.

Jonas watched him.

"You know what?" Gabe said at last. "I guess I can believe all of that. You've told me before about what the community was like. So: there was a girl; she gave birth to me. I believe that. And, Jonas? I know it's true that she loved me. But—"

Jonas nodded. "I know. It's the rest of it."

"Yes, the rest of it is just crazy. That old woman? I'm supposed to believe that some man in strange-looking clothes—"

He noticed that Jonas was no longer looking at him. He was looking across the grassy area, to the path beyond. Gabe followed Jonas's gaze and saw Mentor, the elderly schoolmaster, walking slowly along the path. Nothing unusual. It was school vacation now. Mentor was a part of the village. One often saw him walking around.

To his surprise, Jonas rose from the bench and called to Mentor. "Come with me, Gabe," he said.

He followed Jonas's quick strides toward the path where Mentor had stopped and was waiting. The bearded schoolmaster was stooped, and his face was lined. But his eyes were keen and intelligent. Gabe had always liked Mentor, even when he had not liked school. "Good morning," he said. "What can I do for you gentlemen this morning?"

"Mentor," Jonas began, "I'm trying to explain to Gabe here about Trademaster. About his powers."

Mentor visibly winced. “That’s of the past,” he said abruptly. “It’s forgotten.”

“I’m afraid it isn’t,” Jonas told him. “We have a rather urgent situation. I’ll describe it to you later. But right now I need you to help me convince Gabe that the powers exist. He finds it hard to believe.”

“It *is* hard to believe,” Mentor agreed, nodding. “In a peaceful village like this, it is hard to conceive of true evil.”

“We don’t have a lot of time, Mentor. Could you describe, to Gabe, the trade you made?”

Mentor sighed. “This is necessary?” he asked Jonas.

“Necessary and very important.”

Mentor nodded. “I see. Very well, then. It was years ago, Gabe. You were a little boy. I remember how mischievous you were in school. Sometimes inattentive.”

“I know,” Gabe acknowledged in embarrassment.

“You were too young to go to Trade Mart. But surely you knew of it?”

Gabe shrugged. “I guess. It seemed kind of mysterious.”

“Some of us adults went every time. There was a kind of entertainment to it, watching other villagers make fools of themselves. But you didn’t usually attend, did you, Jonas?”

Jonas shook his head. “It didn’t ever interest me until it got out of hand, and by then I was Leader and had to take action.”

“Well, I was a fool. Many of us were. I was an old man—widowed, lonely. I lived with my daughter, but I knew she would marry someday and I’d be alone. I felt sorry for myself. I had this birthmark. The schoolchildren used to called me Rosie because of it; remember, Gabe?”

Gabe looked at the deep red stain on Mentor’s cheek. He nodded. “We didn’t mean any harm.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Mentor smiled. “But I was self-pitying and foolish. And there was a woman, a widow, I was attracted to. You understand about that, don’t you? Boys your age would understand.”

Gabe’s instinct was to pretend ignorance. The question embarrassed him. But with both Mentor and Jonas watching him intently, it seemed a time for honesty. “Yes,” he said. “I understand.”

“So,” Mentor said with a deep sigh, “I went to Trade Mart and for the first time, I asked to make a trade.”

“What did you ask for?”

Mentor laughed, but it was a sardonic laugh. “I told Trademaster that I wanted to be younger, and handsome. I wanted Stocktender’s widow to fall in love with me.”

Gabe looked at the ground. He was embarrassed for Mentor, that he must make such a confession of his own idiocy. “He couldn’t do that kind of transformation, could he? You should have asked for, oh, I don’t know, maybe a set of new desks for the schoolhouse!”

“Evil can do anything, Gabe,” Mentor said, “for a price.”

Gabe stared at him. “What was the price?” he asked, after a moment.

“His terms were vague. Vague enough that they sounded unimportant. He’s very clever, Trademaster is. He sets his terms but we don’t really understand them when we agree to the trade. He told me I would have to trade away my honor.”

“So you said no.”

Mentor shook his head. “I grabbed at it. *Eagerly.* I told you I was a fool.”

“But, Mentor! You are an honorable man! Everyone knows that. And—I don’t mean to be rude, but you’re not young and handsome. So the trade didn’t work! No one has that kind of power, not even someone evil.”

“Oh, it worked. It worked for many of us here in the village. Me—I grew taller, and my bald spot disappeared. Thick hair where once there had been just this shiny dome! Birthmark? Faded, faded, then poof! Gone! You may not have noticed, Gabe; you were a child then, and it was summer so you weren’t in school. But briefly I was a younger, handsome man. I began courting the pretty widow.

“But you know what, Gabe?”

“What?” Gabe was stunned. So Trademaster, whoever he was, *did* have incredible powers. He could have made a trade with the woman—what was her name, Claire? He tried to pay attention to what Mentor was saying, but his thoughts now were on what this all meant—what it meant to him, Gabe, and to the woman, Claire, who may have made a terrible trade in order to find her . . . her . . .

“I am her son,” he whispered aloud.

Mentor hadn’t heard him. He continued talking. “I had traded away the most important part of myself. I turned selfish. Cruel. The pretty widow didn’t want a man like that! So I had made a meaningless trade, and I had turned into a person I hated—but a handsome one! And young!”

Gabe forced himself to pay attention to the schoolmaster. “What changed you back? You’re a man of honor now, Mentor.”

“Jonas stepped in. Trade Mart had corrupted the whole village. Many people had traded away their best selves. We turned on each other. There was greed, and jealousy, and . . . Well, it had to end. There was a set of horrible events—we lost one of our best young people—”

“Matty?”

“Yes, Matty died, battling the evil. But because of him the rest of us survived and were restored. I got my bald head and my birthmark back!” He laughed. “And I lost my silly romance. Still a bachelor today.”

“And we banished Trademaster,” Jonas reminded them.

“We did. Forever.” Mentor said it with a kind of relief and satisfaction. He turned to leave. Then he said slowly, with a questioning look, “Something’s wrong?”

Jonas nodded. “He’s returned,” he said.

Mentor looked stunned. “So this battle must be waged again?”

Jonas nodded. “This time we must be sure it’s final.”

“Whom do we send this time, to die?” Mentor’s voice was bitter and sad. Like everyone, he had loved Matty.

“I’m going,” Gabe told him.

Mentor was silent. Then, without speaking, he turned away from them.

Gabe and Jonas stood watching the aged schoolmaster walk away. His shoulders were slumped.

“He got himself back,” Gabe said, after a moment.

Jonas nodded. “He did.”

“That means a trade can be reversed,” Gabe said.

Jonas nodded.

“I’m scared.”

“I am too,” Jonas replied. “For you, for all of us.”

She is my mother. She is my mother. Gabe took a deep breath. “How much time do we have?” he asked.

Eleven

THEY HURRIED BACK to the cottage where Claire was dying. The sun was setting now. Someone had lit an oil lamp on the table. This time, in the flickering golden light, Gabe approached the bed without hesitation. He knew, he thought, what he wanted to say: that he'd been waiting all his life for her to find him. That he understood the sacrifice she had made for him. That it didn't matter that she was old. What mattered was being together.

But when he knelt beside her, he thought he'd come too late. Her eyes were half open and glazed. Her mouth fell slack. Her hand on the coverlet, when he took it in his, was limp and cold.

Crying unashamedly, Gabe turned to Jonas, who stood behind him. "I wanted to tell her I knew! I wanted to tell her I remember her! But I'm too late," he wept. "She's gone."

Jonas gently moved Gabe aside. He leaned down and touched Claire's thin, veined neck. Then he rested his head against her chest, listening carefully.

"Her heart is beating still," he told Gabe. "She's very close to death. But she is still alive. We have very little time, and I have very little left of the gift I once possessed. But I am going to use it. I am going to look beyond and try to see where he is. After that, it will be up to you. Your gift is still young."

"Do you need to go to some special place?" Gabe asked, wiping his eyes on the sleeve of his shirt.

"No. I just need to gather my strength. And I need quiet, for concentration.

"Claire? Can you hear me?" Jonas said toward the old woman. She didn't respond. She took a slow, deep breath.

"Gabe will sit here beside you. Gabe, hold her hand so that she knows you're there."

Gabe took the gnarled hand in his own.

"I'm going to close the door to the cottage so that no one comes in, so that it will be quiet. I'll be here, by the window." He was speaking to them both. "I'm told that this is difficult to watch, Gabe. But don't be afraid. It's not painful for me, just very draining. It shouldn't take long."

Jonas went to the front of the cottage, spoke briefly to the people gathered outside, then closed and latched the door. Gabe, watching him, could see that already he was changing in some way; he was becoming something different from the ordinary and pleasant man he had been. He went to the window and stood looking through it into the night, though his eyes were half closed. He was breathing deeply, in and out, very slowly. Suddenly he gasped, as if he were pierced by pain. He moaned slightly. Gabe found himself squeezing the old woman's hand. He continued to watch Jonas.

On the bed, Claire breathed occasionally, with a tortured sound.

Jonas began to shimmer. His body vibrated and was suffused with a silvery light.

"He is beyond now," Gabe said to Claire, hoping that somehow she could hear and know how desperately they were trying to save her.

Jonas gasped loudly again.

"I think he is seeing Trademaster," Gabe whispered, and felt Claire shudder.

Then he fell silent and waited.

Afterward, Gabe had to help Jonas to the nearby rocking chair. He collapsed into it, panting and trembling. "What did you see?" Gabe asked. "Could you find him?" But Jonas was unable to speak. He closed his eyes and held up one hand, asking Gabe to wait. Finally, after resting for several minutes, Jonas opened his eyes.

"I don't think I'll be able to do that again," he said hoarsely to Gabe. "It was the last time. It has become too hard."

He turned slightly and looked toward the bed. "How is she?"

Gabe went to Claire and took her hand. There was no answering squeeze from her. Her hand and arm were limp. But he heard a long, slow breath.

"Alive," Gabe told Jonas, returning to the chair where he was slumped.

"There's not much time." Jonas sat up a little straighter, still breathing hard. "But I saw him; he's close by. It's up to you now, Gabe. I'll stay here with her."

Close by? What did that mean? Gabe found himself looking around the room, and toward the window. *Was someone standing out there in the trees?* A closet door was open in the corner, the interior dark. *Was someone*

in the closet? A board creaked, and Gabe jumped nervously. But it was just Jonas's chair, its curved rockers moving against the wooden floor.

He found a pitcher of water and brought Jonas a cup. Jonas drank, and sat up straighter.

"I forgot to tell you something else that she and I both remembered. When you were a baby—a newchild—you had a stuffed toy." He smiled. "It went everywhere with you. Your hippo."

A blurred image appeared to Gabe. A soft, comforting object. With ears. He had chewed on the ears.

"Po," he said.

"A fine water beast," Jonas said. "You've always been attracted to water, Gabe. And now you must become like Po. Trademaster is on the other side of the river."

It was dark when Gabe stood at the water's edge, alone. He had begged Jonas to come with him. But Jonas had said no.

"Years ago, Gabe, when I took you and ran away, there was a man I loved and left behind. I wanted him to come with me but he said no.

"He was right to refuse. It was my journey and I had to do it without help. I had to find my own strengths, face my own fears. And now you must."

Gabe had leaned down and kissed the papery cheek of the silent woman in the bed. There were long pauses between her breaths now, and occasionally a gurgle deep in her throat. Jonas moved his chair so that he could sit close to her. Then he told Gabe where he would find Trademaster—in a grove of birch trees on the far side of the river—and he grasped Gabe's hand. "Go," he said. "This is your journey, your battle. Be brave. Find your gift. Use it to save what you love."

Now, standing barefoot in the pebbly sand, Gabe didn't feel brave. It was very dark. Clouds covered the moon. There were no sounds but the rushing water, and though the river had always lured him, fascinated him, he had never been here before at night. Suddenly, in the dark, it seemed dangerous and forbidding.

Gabe was a good swimmer. But the place where he and his friends swam was farther down the river, a bend where the water, protected by encircling rocks, was calm, separated from the fast-moving water farther out. It was

safer there, less treacherous. But Jonas had told him to cross the river here. The current would move him downriver and he would emerge at the other side very near to the wooded grove where Trademaster, gloating, was waiting for Claire to die.

"Why is he there?" Gabe had asked.

"I think he must feel a certain satisfaction at knowing how things end. He sets them in motion and then watches from a distance. He has probably been aware of Claire for all these years, since she made the trade."

"Is it just Claire he's been watching?"

"Oh, no, he must have many, many tragedies to keep track of. I suppose they nourish him in some terrible way."

Gabe moved forward and felt the pull of the current against his ankles. He knew, from the disaster with his little boat two days before, how strong the swirling motion of the water was. But he was strong too, and he felt certain he could fight his way across the river. He was holding his cedar paddle. The mud-smeared boat, leaky and useless, was still tied to a tree. But he had run back to Jonas's house and retrieved the paddle for the night swim. He thought he could use it to push himself away from rocks, and perhaps, when he reached the other side, he would need it as a weapon.

He wished he had the power that Jonas had used: the gift of seeing beyond. He would like to know what Trademaster was doing at this moment. Did such a man sleep? Eat?

He had no idea how he was to destroy this evil. Gabe knew—all village children had been taught—which berries, which plants, were lethal. Perhaps he should have crushed some leaves of oleander, or chopped up nightshade root, and somehow found a way to sneak the poison into Trademaster's food. Of course there had been no time for plans like that.

If he were to find Trademaster asleep, then a heavy rock brought down on his head would do it, Gabe thought. Awake? He could use the paddle as if it were a spear or a bludgeon.

The thought made him feel sick.

He was now in the water to his knees, and he realized that instead of plotting how to do away with the enemy—and sickening himself at the thought of it—he must first concentrate on the dangerous swim he was about to undertake. The current pulled at him, and he waded deeper. Soon his feet would be lifted from the bottom and he would be fighting his way

across. He held the buoyant paddle in both hands, crosswise in front of him. His feet lifted and he began to kick and move forward.

The speed with which the current caught him was frightening. He felt himself propelled downriver instead of across. The water rushed over his head and he forced himself up through it to catch his breath. In the darkness he could not see how far out into the river he had been swept, but he could feel the current; he continued kicking his way across it, even as it pushed him sideways against his will. Suddenly his paddle caught against two large rocks and he was held there, able to rest and breathe. The water parted and foamed around him and he waited, gathering his strength. He knew he would have to leave this wedged protection and enter the river's surge again. But for this moment he rested. Then, as he pondered the mission that lay ahead for him, he realized, suddenly, he could not fulfill it.

I cannot kill someone, he thought.

As he had the realization, a cloud slid beyond the moon and pale light illuminated the river. He could see where he was, nearing the halfway point, and where he must aim for. The water between him and the other side was very turbulent, but in the gleaming moonlight, the grove of birches, his destination, was visible. Trademaster would be lurking there. He must pull the paddle free from the rocks now and force himself into that maelstrom. He would fight his way across, and—

I cannot kill someone. The unbidden thought was so strong the second time that he may have said it aloud, into the night, into the roaring sound of the turbulence.

Oddly, as if affected by his thought, the motion of the river subsided slightly. As he waited there, suspended from his paddle between the rocks, his legs could sense the change in the current. For a moment the water around him was still. The water ahead of him was calm. Then it began to move again, to swirl and suck at him.

What had changed?

Nothing, except that into the night breeze, into the noise of the river, he had whispered a phrase. He began to say the words again.

I cannot kill—

Three words was all it took. The three words that he had spoken soothed the sky, the river, the world.

He repeated them, like a chant. He loosened the paddle from where it was wedged. With his fingers he could feel the carved names in the smooth wet wood: *Tarik. Simon. Nathaniel. Stefan. Jonas.* Though she had not carved her name, he added Kira in his mind. Then little Matthew, and Annabelle. Finally he said his mother's name—*Claire*—aloud, adding it to the list of those who cared about him. He shouted it—"Claire!"—into the night, begging her to live. Holding tightly to the paddle, he began to kick his way easily across the gently flowing water in the moonlight. While he propelled himself, he said the words in rhythm with the movement of his fluttering kick—*I cannot kill, I cannot kill*—murmuring them until he reached the opposite bank easily and pulled himself, dripping, ashore.

When he fell silent, he heard the river resume its relentless churn and pull. A brisk wind blew. Above him, the moon receded and disappeared again behind clouds. Around him the shadows darkened and enveloped the swaying shrubbery and trees. At the edge of the bushes stood a tall man wrapped in a dark cloak.

Twelve

GABE SHUDDERED. SUDDENLY he was very cold. The wind that was rustling the bushes and making the trees sway was also causing his wet garments to feel icy against his skin.

But his shudder was more fear than chill. He could see the man standing in the shadows.

Somehow Gabe had anticipated that he would arrive on the river's far side, catch his breath, get his bearings—he had never crossed the river before—and then begin to search. He had assumed his enemy would be hiding. He had planned to make his way with stealth to the place where they would encounter each other. He thought he would have time to prepare, though he had not known how.

Instead, the man was not hiding at all. He stood, wrapped in a dark cloak, in full view at the edge of the trees. Even through the darkness, Gabe could see that his eyes glittered. His face was expressionless, but his eyes—they were staring directly at Gabe—were excited. Then he spoke.

"What a pleasure," the man said with an air of mocking hospitality. "Seldom do people come looking for me."

Gabe didn't reply. He didn't know how to. Nervously, he clutched the slim stalk of the paddle, the only thing in this strange place that felt familiar and comforting. Beneath his thumb he could feel the ridge of the gouged *J*, the place where Jonas had carved his name.

"Are you not going to introduce yourself?"

Gabe cleared his throat. "My name is Gabriel," he said.

There was a flurry of cloak and motion. The man, who had been standing some distance away, was suddenly so near that Gabe could smell the stench of him. Odd, as he looked very clean, Gabe thought. His clothes, visible in the parted cloak, were pressed, almost stiff with creases. His face was pale and seemed very white against the darkness. His dark hair was combed and oiled.

And he was too close. When he leaned forward and said harshly, "You fool! Did you think I didn't know your name?" his rancid breath was hot against Gabe's face. "And you, of course, know mine.

"Don't you?" he sneered. *"Don't you?"*

“Yes,” Gabe said. “I know your name, Trademaster.” He stepped back, slightly, away from the smell. The foul breath was making him feel nauseated.

“And we both know why we are here.” The voice had become soft, as if the man were confiding a secret.

Gabriel nodded. “Yes,” he whispered back. “I do.”

“You hope to destroy me, and I plan to destroy you.”

In a quick flash of memory, Gabe thought of Mentor, his teacher, standing in front of a class of restless children, teaching them about language. About verbs. *Hope. Plan.* How different the meanings were. *Hope* seemed tentative, uncertain—exactly how Gabe was feeling. He took a deep breath and tried to calm his own anxiety.

“What weapons do you have? Can they match mine?” Trademaster’s gloved hand reached inside his thick cloak. Gabe grasped the paddle more tightly, trying to steady himself. His knees felt weak.

“I see you have brought a crude stick. Pathetic. Is that the only weapon you have?” The voice was contemptuous.

“This isn’t a weapon,” Gabe confessed. “I didn’t bring a weapon. I cannot kill—”

He began to repeat the phrase that had mysteriously helped him cross the river. To his surprise, Trademaster winced. The wind stopped, suddenly. The restless movement of the trees ceased. Again the moon slid from the clouds and the night brightened slightly.

Back in the cottage, Jonas had been waiting in the rocking chair beside the bed. Earlier, Kira had brought him supper. Together they had moistened Claire’s dry lips with water and her tongue had moved slightly. But her eyes had remained closed and her breathing was irregular. Sometimes she gasped and her fingers plucked at the blanket. But mostly she was silent and still. He knew she would die during the night, unless—

He tried not to think of the *unless.* He had seen, when he looked beyond, that Trademaster was out there in the birch grove. He had seen too—but had not told Gabe—that Trademaster was waiting for the boy.

Gabe had always been a determined child. Even as an infant, when Jonas had brought him here after a long and torturous journey, Gabe had held out, had been strong, had stayed alive, when he, Jonas, had almost given up. It had always been clear to Jonas that Gabe had some kind of gift. And

it might have been simply this: the tenacity of the boy, the stubbornness. Who else would have worked so hard at an impossible project like the doomed boat?

But now, waiting through the night, thinking of how Gabe had set out on another probably impossible mission, one that might well cost him his life, Jonas found himself hoping desperately that the stubborn energy would be accompanied by a deeper gift of some sort, something that would be able to pierce the very core of the creature he would be facing soon. Jonas shuddered. Trademaster was so inhuman, so dangerous. So evil. And Gabe was so young and vulnerable.

He would be across the river now, Jonas realized, checking the time. He is on the other side by now.

The shift in the atmosphere calmed Gabriel. It had happened the same way in the river: the moon had appeared and the rush of water had subsided; the world had been somehow soothed. Standing now in the moonlight, Gabe stroked the paddle, feeling the carved names, and wondered if perhaps Trademaster had felt the sudden shift.

But instead of calmed, his opponent was angered. The gloved hand emerged from the deep folds of the cloak and in the moonlight Gabe could see that it now held a gleaming knife with a long, very narrow blade and pointed tip. Frightened, he stepped back.

"Stiletto," Trademaster hissed. "You don't have one of these tucked away someplace? It would serve you well. Quite sharp. Quite deadly.

"Here!" he said suddenly, and tossed the stiletto to Gabe. "Take mine!"

Gabe dropped the paddle and caught the handle of the weapon awkwardly, relieved that the blade had not sliced through his hand. The knife was surprisingly heavy. He didn't want it. But he seemed to have no choice. He tightened his grip on the cold steel handle.

"*Now* you can kill," Trademaster said with a short, mirthless laugh. He reached again into the folds of his cloak. The sky darkened again and the wind resumed, whipping the tree branches back and forth. Gabe peered through the darkness, trying to see what weapon might appear. Another stiletto? Would the man lunge forward with his own narrow blade? Terrified, Gabe held his knife up, hoping to deflect the attack that was coming.

Then suddenly the stiletto was on the ground and Gabe's hands were empty and defenseless. Trademaster was inches from him and had struck the knife out of Gabe's hand with a larger weapon, something with a terrifying curved blade.

"Guan dao," Trademaster whispered into Gabe's ear, naming it.

The wind howled. The man held Gabe's neck with one gloved hand, raised his weapon with the other, and touched the tender skin there with the blade. Gabe held his breath, afraid that the slightest movement would cause it to slice into his skin. He could feel the exquisite sharpness of the steel.

The two of them stood motionless in an embrace that was wrought by hatred. Gabe hoped that his death would be quick. It was the only thing that he could hope for now.

Then, to Gabe's surprise, still with the knife poised, Trademaster began to talk. Gabe could again smell his foul breath. His voice was low, and he recognized the tone, superior and arrogant, as bragging.

"You're such a small, unworthy opponent," Trademaster taunted. "I've destroyed people far more important than you."

Gabe said nothing. He barely breathed. He was motionless, still aware of the blade against his skin.

"Leaders. Whole families." The voice was excited. "I've torn them to pieces. Left them in whimpering shreds!"

Gabe felt a sharp sliver of pain, and something trickled from his neck onto his bare shoulder. Trademaster had allowed the razor-sharp blade to make a shallow cut.

"Wars," the voice went on. "I've caused wars!"

Gabe stood motionless, paralyzed, but sensed that the man wanted a reaction from him. Some kind of admiration, perhaps. He stayed silent.

"I've destroyed whole communities," the man murmured gleefully into Gabe's ear. "Do you believe me?"

"Yes," Gabe whispered. And it was true. He *did* believe that he had such power. This was not a man, Gabe realized. It was a *force* disguised as a man. It was nothing human. It was simple evil, wearing a cloak. Jonas had told him this but he had not understood, not until now. He tried desperately to remember what advice Jonas had given him. How should he fight this battle? Finally he said the only thing he could think of to say.

“If you have such power,” Gabe whispered, still trying not to move, “why kill someone as unimportant as me?”

To his amazement, Trademaster withdrew. He lifted the blade from Gabe’s skin and tossed it to the ground, where it fell beside the stiletto. Then he smoothed the folds of his cloak. “I have other weapons,” he said. “Cutlass? Pole-ax? Machete? Cleaver? Pick one and we’ll duel.” He licked his lips and gave a harsh laugh.

Gabe could think of nothing to reply. He remained silent.

“No? Dueling doesn’t appeal? Forget the weaponry, then. I’ll make it more fun, the way Trade Mart was,” he announced. “I’m going to offer you a trade.”

Through the window, quite suddenly, the moonless night brightened. A pale golden stream of light appeared across the floor, reaching almost to the bed. At the same time, Claire’s hoarse, uneven breathing changed slightly. She seemed quieter, more comfortable. Jonas reached over and took her hand. He had been holding it, stroking it, off and on throughout the night. The veins had been thick and knotted under the thin, frail skin; the fingers were thickened at the joints.

Now, startlingly, the old woman’s hand felt different. Smoother. More pliant. In the sudden light he leaned down to look. But at that moment the moonlight disappeared; the night was dark again. He thought of going to relight the oil lamp in the corner, to bring it closer to Claire. But why? *Let her sleep,* he thought. *She is at peace. Let her die without knowing the peril her son is in.*

Perhaps this is what death does, he thought, still touching her hand. Smooths the skin, eases the painful joints. *Yes,* he thought. *This must be death coming.*

Jonas nodded off against his will and dozed fitfully. It had been such a long, exhausting day. He didn’t see the moonlight reappear, then recede, then reappear. Claire’s hand slid away from his. He didn’t see the skin clear, its dark spots fading, or how the thickened, discolored nails became shell-like and translucent.

“A boat.” The offer was abrupt and angry.

“I don’t need a boat.”

Trademaster looked at him slyly. “It’s not a question of *need*, my stubborn, stupid lad. It all has to do with *want*. It’s *always* want.”

Gabe stood there silently. He was cold. He was wet, still, from the river, and now the stiff breeze had resumed. He rubbed his own arms briskly.

“Chilly?” Trademaster said with a sneer, seeing him shiver. “I could loan you my cloak.” He twirled it. “You could come inside. I could *envelop* you.”

Gabe didn’t reply. The thought of being inside the dark cloak revolted him.

His eyes glittering, Trademaster said, “All right then, stand there and shiver. Let’s revisit the boat idea, shall we? Not need, but want. Do you *want* a boat? Wait—don’t answer yet. Let’s make it, oh, a fine sailboat. And part of the deal, guaranteed: billowing sails, a sunny day, a smooth lake, and a strong wind.”

He leaned forward and beckoned with a thin, gloved finger. *“Want it?”*

Not long ago Gabe would have wanted it very much indeed. But things had changed for him. A boat no longer held any appeal. He no longer needed a boat. His quest for belonging, for love, had ended when he had knelt by a bed and held his dying mother’s hand.

He stood silently for a moment, trying to think of how to say no without further enraging Trademaster.

“Wait! I’m going to add something!” The man leaned even closer.

Gabe didn’t reply.

“On the fine teak deck of this superior sailing vessel? Seated there, her hair blowing in the wind, smiling at you, looking at you very affectionately—extremely affectionately—as you sail your craft, maybe leaning forward to offer you something . . . Let me think. An apple—she has just peeled a fine round apple and she will offer you a bite, she being, of course, someone you care about deeply, maybe that freckle-faced girl named . . . Deirdre?

“Want it?” Trademaster put his mouth to Gabe’s ear and breathed the question hoarsely.

“No,” Gabe said. “I don’t.”

Trademaster laughed cruelly. “Of course you don’t,” he rasped. “You’re waiting for something more? Let’s do it, then! Still the boat. You can have the boat and the lake and the sunshine. And she’ll still be there, leaning

forward, offering you food and sustenance and affection—but it's not silly little Deirdre at all. Know who it is?

"Got a guess?" he hissed.

Gabe did. But he refused to say it. He tightened his hands on the smooth wood of the paddle. When he did, he felt the curved indentations, the places carved here and there with names: *Tarik. Nathaniel. Simon. Stefan.*

"It's Claire," Trademaster murmured to him. "Sweet, young Claire with the long, curly hair. She could be there with you. You know who Claire is, don't you?

"Want it? Want her?"

Gabe felt the place where the name *Jonas* had been carved. The sweet cedar of the paddle was infused with all of them: the ones who cared about him, the ones who at this moment were sending strength to him. As his hand lingered on the wood, he suddenly felt something unfamiliar beneath his fingers. The paddle had been smooth in this spot. Now, to his surprise, it had been carved. He felt the rounded curve of a *C.* An *L.* And then the four letters that followed.

"Don't you dare to speak my mother's name," he said fiercely. "I don't want your trade."

Trademaster stared at him with his hostile, gleaming eyes. Gabe remembered what he knew, what Jonas had told him, of Einar, who had refused an offered trade and been mutilated so hideously. He saw that Trademaster was glancing now at the weapons near them on the ground.

Frantically he tried again to remember what Jonas had told him. *Use your gift.* That was it. *Use your gift!*

He was very frightened, but looking directly at Trademaster, he concentrated and willed himself to veer.

Thirteen

THE SILENCE CAME, lowering itself on him as if a curtain had been drawn. The rush of water behind him disappeared. The leaves on the surrounding trees still moved in the wind, but without sound. Gabe entered Trademaster. He found himself whirling through eons of time, destroying at random, screaming with rage and pain.

He became Trademaster. He was sick with searing hatred, and in the endless vortex through which he whirled, there was no comfort.

He *understood* Trademaster, and the deep malevolence that inhabited him. It was true, what he had earlier sensed, that Trademaster was inhuman. He was not a man but simply disguised as one. He was the force of evil, of all evil for all time.

Gabriel floated and spun within the veer, being part of evil, feeling the anguish and loneliness of it, of having been cast out again and again throughout history. Of gathering strength once more. Gaining power. Weaponry. Treachery. Cruelty. The feelings were strong enough to destroy one human boy, but he fought through them, concentrating on the knowledge of himself and his task. There must be something within the gift of the veer that would help him now when he emerged to face Trademaster for the final time.

Jonas was startled out of his fitful doze by a sound.

Claire was sitting up. The room was still quite dark, but he could see that she had pushed her coverlet aside. Her eyes were bright, and her shoulders, once frail and hunched, were now straight and firm.

“I’m hungry,” she said.

Suddenly, within the simmering wrath and agony of the veer, Gabe felt *hunger.* It startled him. Such a small and unimportant feeling—one he had felt himself often as he headed home to dinner.

But this, he realized, letting himself go deeper, to feel it completely, was not a yearning for a bowl of soup or piece of bread. Trademaster was *starving.*

Gabe remembered what Jonas had told him about this kind of evil—that it is fed by its victims.

He wants to know how his tragedies play out, Jonas had said. *He likes to see how things end. He gloats. It nourishes him.*

It came to him quickly and was so simple. Those who aren't nourished will die. Those who starve will die.

Knowing exactly what he must do, Gabriel shed the veer. Sound returned. Trademaster still stood before him, sneering, in his cloak. Nothing had changed except for Gabe's understanding.

He stood up straight and said loudly, "Remember Mentor?"

Trademaster curled his lip and laughed. "Blotchy face? Old, saggy skin? That miserable fool. Of course I remember him."

"He was my teacher."

"I ruined him."

"No. You ruined him for a while. But he's himself again. He has his honor back. He's happy."

On hearing Gabe's words, Trademaster gasped slightly. He clutched his stomach as if a sharp pain had stabbed him. Or perhaps a gnawing ache? Hunger?

"Remember someone named Einar?"

Gabe had recoiled in horror when Jonas had related Einar's terrible history to him. Now he watched Trademaster's face. "He's the one who turned you down, remember? He said no to a trade!"

Trademaster spat on the ground. He laughed in contempt. "I destroyed him."

"You didn't, actually," Gabe told him calmly. "He made a good life for himself."

"The life of a cripple?" Trademaster taunted, and briefly imitated Einar's lurching walk.

"No. The life of a good man. He knows each lamb by name. He can make the sounds of every bird.

"And a beautiful girl fell in love with him," Gabe added.

Trademaster groaned. He sank onto one knee. His cloak flapped around him, too large suddenly, as if the man inside had shrunk.

"You remember her, I know. Her name was Claire," Gabe said. "She was looking for her little boy. And you know what? She found me, Trademaster.

“She was willing to give you everything she had. And you took it from her. You took her youth, and her beauty, and her energy and her health—”

For a moment, thinking of his mother, Gabe couldn’t continue speaking. He fell silent and choked back tears. Then he took a deep breath and went on, “—and it didn’t matter. We found each other. None of it mattered but that.

“You won’t ever know what that’s like, to love someone. In a way, I pity you. But I hope you starve.”

Gabe found himself looking down on his enemy, who was hunched over on the ground, whimpering.

His voice, which had earlier been low and sinuous, now gave a loud drawn-out howl, as if of grief. His eyes were closed, but he groped in the dark for the weapons that had been discarded on the ground. When he touched them, he howled again. At that moment, the moon once more emerged from dissipating clouds and the wind fell still. In the new light, Gabe could see that the weapons had changed. They were broken toys, bits of rusted tin, as if a careless child had left them out in the rain.

“Your power is gone,” Gabe said.

The only response was a moan. As Gabe watched, Trademaster shrank further. Soon he had become a formless, unidentifiable heap of something that smelled of rot.

Gabe nudged with his toe at what was left. It had never been human—he knew that. Now it fell away when he touched it with his foot, and became nothing. He stared at it for a long time as the night lifted and dawn seeped into the sky. Then he found a sharp rock and dug into the earth until he had made a hole just the right size. He planted his paddle there and banked the damp earth around it so that it stood and marked the place where Evil had been vanquished.

Then he turned and looked at the river and at the pale wisps of smoke coming from chimneys in the village beyond. It was, all of it, familiar and beckoning and safe. He lowered himself into the gently flowing water and swam easily across.

Sunrise woke Jonas. He had fallen asleep in the chair after feeding Claire some of the soup that Kira had brought. She had murmured a thank-you. Then he had tucked the blanket around her and waited there beside the bed

while she resumed her sleep. Her breathing was stronger. He realized that tonight would not be the night of her death after all.

Was there a chance that somehow Gabe—? Jonas didn't allow himself to finish the thought. For a moment he had simply watched Claire sleep, marveling at her resilience. Then he had returned to his chair and his worry about the boy.

Now, waking, he was stiff and disoriented. He yawned, stretched, and looked around, confused, then remembered Claire and rushed to the bed. But it was empty, the covers thrown back.

The door to the cottage was open. She was standing there in her nightdress, breathing deeply of the daybreak air. She was tall and slender, with coppery hair that fell in curls around her shoulders. Hearing him, she turned to Jonas and smiled.

He thought he heard her say, "I see the sun."

Indeed, the sky was pink with dawn light. Then Jonas looked past Claire and saw Gabe approaching on the path.

THE END

About the Author

LOIS LOWRY is known for her versatility and invention as a writer. She was born in Hawaii and grew up in New York, Pennsylvania, and Japan. After several years at Brown University, she turned to her family and to writing. She is the author of more than thirty books for young adults, including the popular Anastasia Krupnik series. She has received countless honors, among them the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award, the California Young Reader's Medal, and the Mark Twain Award. She received Newbery Medals for two of her novels, *Number the Stars* and *The Giver.* Her first novel, *A Summer to Die,* was awarded the International Reading Association's Children's Book Award. Ms. Lowry now divides her time between Cambridge and an 1840s farmhouse in

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